

Venture Fund boosts Lowell's entrepreneurial spirit

Every city has its narrative, but Lowell's has more twists and turns than most.

It was a huge textile center before mill jobs left. Tough days followed. Then in the 1970s and 1980s, the election of native son Paul Tsongas to the U.S. House and then Senate, followed by the boom in the minicomputer industry, opened the spigot for economic aid and taxes. But Tsongas left politics in 1984 after being diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, and the minicomputer industry crashed.

So did Lowell's fortunes.

Today, however, a walk through Lowell offers a lot of positive surprises. Some can be credited to something called the Downtown Venture Fund, which is closing in on its 10th anniversary.

The \$2.4 million revolving loan fund, backed by about \$600,000 from public

sources and significant investments from local banks, is helping to drive commercial development downtown.

Most of the effort is going to an expansive area of converted mill buildings that surround the canals that crisscross downtown. The city center includes the Tsongas Center at UMass Lowell and a large auditorium. The **Merrimack Repertory Theatre** operates there.

Commercial activity downtown tends to be of the sole-proprietor variety — something leaders of the **Lowell Development & Financial Corp.** are trying to advance with the Venture Fund.

The group uses the revolving loan fund to help entrepreneurs launch startups, especially retail and dining establishments. Loans are capped at \$200,000. The interest rate is 6 percent, and no payments are required during the first year.

One reason for driving small-scale commercial growth is that city leaders are keen on boosting the population in downtown Lowell and figure that people will want to live near amenities. The relationship is "symbiotic," said **Adam Baacke**, assistant city manager.

Part of city leaders' mission appears to be — they didn't come out and say it

— attracting people who choose to live there rather than just drawing people to occupy what is a considerable stock of subsidized housing. Many of the new residents are young professional couples. A significant number are empty-nesters from the surrounding area.

All of them provide food traffic for places like **Blue Taleh**, a restaurant specializing in Thai and Japanese cuisine.

"This was a location I really wanted," owner **Steve Ramirez** said.

But he didn't want to just rent the space and sink a small fortune into renovating a site he might lose, he said. "The Venture Fund made it possible to not only do the build-out, but to buy the property."

Franky Descoteaux had so much success with her fund-backed **Mambo** restaurant that she opened a clothing store across the street. Last year she ran successfully for City Council.

The Old Court, an Irish pub that's rumored to offer a great pint of Guinness — this columnist may or may not have tried one on a weekday morning — emerged when two bartenders who previously worked elsewhere used the Venture Fund to open their own place.

"There was just a real need for a real

Irish pub downtown," said **Finbarr Sheehan**, one of the two proprietors.

To a person, the entrepreneurs said they could not have gotten their businesses off the ground without the Venture Fund and its optimistic lending standards.

Numbers provided by the city suggest the campaign to lure people with reasonably affordable housing and good food has been successful.

In 2000, 79 percent of the downtown's 1,722 units of housing were designated "affordable."

This year, 50 percent of 3,179 units are similarly designated.

James J. Cook, executive director of the development corporation, said members of the group that launched the Downtown Venture Fund weren't sure at first how well it would do.

But now there's "critical mass," he said, and even some merchants who were skeptical about seeing competitors get public help have changed their minds now that the whole area seems to be feeding off itself, as it were.

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