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Rubbing neighbors a good way

By Ann Baldelli

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If the improvements at Columbus Square Auto at Blinman Street and Columbus Circle are an indication of the spin-off New London is looking for from its new Harbour Towers development, well, things are off to a good start.

The \$16 million, 52-unit condominium project at 463 Bank St. not only restored a landmark four-story building and blended it with a new nine-story tower and a three-story garage, but it also appears to be spurring other neighborhood improvements.

City officials are giddy that Harbour Towers is nearly finished and actively marketing to potential new homeowners, but they're even more thrilled about what else is transpiring in tandem with the condo development.

Like the transformation of a vehicle repair and wrecker service business at Reed and Blinman streets, directly behind the new Harbour Towers.

Columbus Square Auto has a fresh new look. The tiny red brick shop's trim has been painted, grass is growing in the miniature yard, and the fence, well if it isn't new, it certainly looks like it could be.

Just the kind of improvements that New London needs to see and that Harbour Towers could help to inspire.

Prices for the condominium homes that have hardwood floors, granite countertops, custom wood cabinetry and other high-end amenities start at \$245,000 and go to almost \$700,000, depending on the size, views they afford and how high up they are.

They're a great option for people who want to live in downtown New London and take advantage of its opportunities and accessibility, and several out-of-towners have already bought in. But just as important, the new condominiums can be a catalyst.

Anthony Silvestri, the project manager at Harbour Towers, is a big city cheerleader with big ideas for New London. He's already talked to DDLC Energy, the fuel oil company at 410 Bank St., to see about removing its old oil tanks across Bank Street from the new condominiums.

They've reached an agreement, Silvestri says, and two of the tanks will be cut up for scrap and a mural painted on the third one. The mural, or trompe-l'œil (French for "tricks the eye,") will give an illusion of looking through the tank to the Coast Guard barque Eagle floating on the nearby Thames River.

That's the kind of positive thinking that New London needs. People like to knock New London, but those are the people who haven't been downtown lately. Or if they have, they haven't gotten out of their cars.

Bank Street from Howard to State has had more successes than failures in recent years. There is still progress to be made, but in

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incremental steps, the downtown is making headway.

And it's not only multi-million investments that are paying dividends. There are small businesses finding their way to the city, too. Some have come on their own, and some with help from the city's modest rental assistance program, but however they've arrived, they're in New London now.

There's the new CrossFit gym at 181 Bank St. that's got people running all over the downtown from early morning to night; and Everything But the Stamp has relocated from Mystic to J. Solomon Office Supply at 208 Bank St. New London Ink is in the former tailor's shop at 121 Bank St., offering organic or henna tattoos. And the Gallery at Firehouse Square is not to be missed at 239 Bank St. Just look at the building's transformation from the outside and you'll be wowed.

Green Street Skate is opening soon (on Green Street of course) and Surprise Party Goods is moving into 54 State St.

On June 5 there will be a celebration and rededication of the redesigned downtown Parade plaza, where festivities are planned throughout the summer.

Not everything is rosy. Some businesses have failed and a couple of properties could be auctioned at a tax sale next month if they don't pay what they owe. And there are still empty storefronts and derelict properties.

But good things are happening along Bank and State streets in New London and it's believers like the people at Harbour Towers who are making it happen.

Ann Baldelli is associate editorial page editor.

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