

2009 – A Few Bright Spots

Steve Smith, December 2009

2009 will not be a year that will be remembered fondly. As a national recession took hold during the year, the South Coast saw more than its fair share of pain.

Unemployment rates reached levels that we thought would never return. Fall River and New Bedford each saw prolonged monthly rates in excess of 15%. Home foreclosures were distressingly widespread. Personal and business bankruptcies were common. State and local budgets were slashed to the bone and then some. Police, firefighters and teachers were laid off. Public services were scaled back and facilities were closed.

As if to add insult to injury, it seemed to rain every weekend in June and July.

But there were a few bright spots, and as we head into 2010, it is worth reflecting upon the good things that happened in 2009.

Exit 8B – Freetown

Construction bids were opened for this long planned exit off Route 24 on the Fall River-Freetown town line, and construction will commence early in 2010. This new exit will open up hundreds of acres of industrial park land for development in Fall River and Freetown including the South Coast BioPark. This park should be a good building block for the region's economy in the next decade. The interchange project, which is being developed with an innovative design build approach, is being funded with federal stimulus funds. The low bid opened in October came in at less than half of the \$70 million budgeted.

Taunton River Wild & Scenic Designation

Last spring the Congress and the National Park Service granted "wild and scenic" status to the Taunton River after a decade long planning process. With Congressman Barney Frank acting as the project's champion in Washington, a Congressional vote sealed the deal. This recognition provides added protection to this beautiful and underappreciated resource. Businesses in the Fall River area will not be affected by the designation.

New Bedford Hotel

In the midst of one of the worst real estate markets in memory, ground was broken on the New Bedford waterfront for a new hotel, the first in the city in over forty years. While the hotel will be a welcome addition to the city's burgeoning tourist scene, its symbolic importance cannot be overstated. LaFrance Hospitality Company is the developer.

Courthouse Projects

The two new courthouses that are rising in downtown Fall River and Taunton couldn't have come at a better time. When completed, these multi-million dollar construction projects will bring needed relief to our overcrowded court system, but for now they are providing a needed boost to the construction industry at a critical time.

South Coast Rail Corridor Plan

No, we did not get the train in 2009, but the project got closer to reality. Most significant was the release in August of the South Coast Rail Economic Development and Land Use Corridor Plan by Governor Deval Patrick. This plan will make sure that this project is more than just a train, but also a tool for stimulating investment and smart growth along the corridor and at the proposed station sites. While there are still significant hurdles for South Coast Rail (notably financial and environmental), we are closer to having a good project than we were a year ago.

New Brightman Street Bridge

It's finally happening and the progress can be seen by all. After years of delays and foot dragging, the new bridge is rapidly taking shape. Steel beams are being lowered into place between lonely bridge abutments that have been standing unconnected for too long. When completed, the new bridge will solve traffic and navigation woes, but for now it is a welcome construction project providing needed jobs.

Two other big regional projects seemed to stall in 2009, and given their controversial nature, that might not be bad news for everyone. The proposed Wampanoag casino in Middleborough hit legal and financial snags and at year's end the tribe had announced plans for a much scaled back version. The proposed LNG terminal in Fall River was given a thumbs down by the U.S. Coast Guard, but Hess Oil is pursuing an alternate strategy of locating an "offshore" terminal in the middle of Mt. Hope Bay. We'll certainly hear more in 2010.

On the political front, 2009 was an eventful one. There was a sharp shift in the country's direction with the inauguration of President Barack in January. Massachusetts lost the lion of the senate in August when Senator Kennedy died. The state will have a new senator early in 2010 to fill the enormous vacancy left by the senator's passing. As the year closes, Fall River has a new mayor. And South Coast's own Congressman Frank is leading the charge in Washington to plug the holes that brought us this recession. As Chair of the Financial Services Committee, he is seeking to overhaul the financial system to prevent future meltdowns.

As we head into 2010, we can take some comfort in the fact that during this past year, we were moving ahead as a region on many fronts that will hold us in good stead in the future. Most of us will be happy to see 2009 in the rear view mirror, but maybe we'll look back and realize that many good things got started when things looked the bleakest

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