

Providence Journal

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

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A big chunk of downtown has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The listing, made by the National Park Service on April 5 and announced yesterday by the state Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission, is more than just an honor.



A current-day view of Main Street in the downtown Pawtucket historic district. Photo courtesy of the RIHPHC

It has an economic impact, thanks to lucrative state and federal tax credits.

For that reason, yesterday's announcement was like catnip to the city planners, who have been trying for years to reverse downtown's decline.

"We're thrilled about this," city planning department director Michael D. Cassidy said over the telephone.

Now that part of downtown has been placed on the National Register, Cassidy said, the properties within it are eligible for the tax credits.

That opens the door to the kind of redevelopment that occurred at Parkin Yarn, the former textile mill outside the district on Bayley Street that was converted into condominiums, and Lebanon Mills, the factory complex along the Blackstone River that was reborn as Riverfront Lofts, he said.

A property is eligible for the state's 30-percent historic tax credit if it's owner-occupied, such as a condominium, or income-producing, such as a building with apartments for rent, according Cassidy. It's eligible for the federal government's 20-percent historic tax credit if it's income-producing, he said.

"The historic tax credits are what's driving the rehabilitation of downtown Pawtucket," Cassidy said.

The so-called Downtown Pawtucket Historic District contains 50 buildings, many of which lend themselves to the kind of redevelopment that would qualify for tax credits.

The buildings include banks, stores, a newsstand, two post offices, a church, a library, two industrial buildings and a pair of apartment houses, according to the city's National Historic Register application.

They are part of an irregular 14-acre area bordered on the south by the East Avenue Extension, on the east by High Street, on the west by Broad and Exchange streets, and on the north by Manchester Street.

The Downtown Pawtucket Historic District was nominated by the National Historic Register last fall, on the basis of an application prepared for the city by preservation consultant Kathryn J. Cavanaugh.

Cassidy said an earlier downtown district, presented in an application submitted two years ago, was rejected by the state Preservation Commission and never forwarded to the National Park Service in Washington, D.C.

The first effort was rejected, he said, because the State Preservation Historic Commission didn't think that including Park Place, which is sprinkled with churches, and a predominately residential section of High Street, resulted in a unified area.

"We've been working at this for a couple of years. We felt we had enough of a core of historic buildings to qualify," Cassidy said.

The trick was determining how to combine all those buildings into a single, coherent historic district, he said.

The district that was finally approved includes four buildings that had already been listed on the National Register: The Deborah Cooks Sayles Library and the Old Post Office, both on Summer Street, which were listed in 1975 and 1976; and the Elks Lodge and the Pawtucket Times building, both on Exchange Street, which were listed in 1983.

The district includes buildings constructed during the 1940s that initially weren't considered eligible for the National Register: the McHale building on East Avenue and the New England Telephone & Telegraph building on High Street.

In the 1970s, when the city first began creating historic districts, Cassidy said, those buildings were considered too new.

"However, 30 years later, it's a different story. They're still around and they looked like they did in the 1940s," Cassidy said.