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## NCDC marks 50 years

NORWICH — On a September day in 1965, Henry C. Witte trudged through a large wooded area in Norwich, leaning on a large walking stick for support. Half a century later, those untouched acres have become a massive economic engine that added \$110.6 million to the city's 2012 grand list.

Witte was the first president of the Norwich Community Development Corporation, and the forested lands he walked through 50 years ago are now a 450-acre business park that's home to 2,300 employees and 40 businesses.

That hike — turning potential into promise — is an apt metaphor for NCDC itself.

"The business park was an important first step for NCDC. You've got to look forward. That's what you've got to do at all times to be successful at this," Daniel Dennis, who served as NCDC's president for more than 20 years, said Tuesday at a 50th anniversary gala for the agency that, by its estimates, has brought \$250 million worth of new real estate investment into the community since its inception.

NCDC President Bob Mills' uses a baseball analogy to explain success: Singles and doubles are what drive in scores, but people only notice towering home runs.

"The idea that you stick to it day in and day out is what makes this organization so great," Mills said. "I think, given what's gone on in this community, for this agency to be around for 50 years is truly an amazing feat."

A small group of civic leaders established NCDC in 1963 with the aim of bringing a functioning business park to the city.

In this fiscal year, NCDC anticipates a net income of just \$25,081, with total expenses of \$454,745. In 2007, the City Council and Norwich Public Utilities each began to contribute \$150,000 a year to the organization so it could remain solvent in lean years when there were no projects to work on.

"It's tough to bring a city back," said Maynard Strickland, a member of NCDC's board of directors for more than 12 years. "NCDC's (board) has always been full of veteran Norwich people who have been around a long time and have Norwich's best interests at heart. That's what it's all about."

Don Paight, who ran NCDC's now defunct downtown development program from 1982 through 1987, learned from his days with the agency that determination and patience yield results.

For the last 27 years, Paight has been executive director of the Fort Myers (Fla.) Downtown Redevelopment Agency.

The southwest Florida city, population 63,512, has welcomed 53 businesses over the past two years, and officials are in the final round of talks to bring in another hotel.

But the influx of industry came after almost 20 years of thankless, grinding work: Facade restorations, street scape improvements and road realignments.

"It's been the last seven or eight years that people have recognized the successes we've had, and that's because the first 15 to 20 years have been spent building up small projects," Paight said. "While each one was celebrated, it wasn't until they all started coming together that people took notice and businesses started moving in."

Mills and other NCDC officials believe Norwich is on the cusp of a similar break through.

NCDC has had a hand in the construction of nearly every major venture Norwich has known over that span, from the Stanley Israelite Business Park and its Dodd Stadium to downtown's Superior Court building and Otis Library.

Strickland served NCDC during a boom time for the agency. The \$9.3 million, 6,270-seat Dodd Stadium had opened in 1995, a year before he joined. In 1998, city officials took ownership of an old textile finishing business built on five acres in Occum, eventually guiding its transformation into the Occum Park Redevelopment Project.

In 2004, \$390,000 in federal aid — administered by NCDC — from the Department of Housing and Urban Development was funneled into the former Capehart Mill site to pay for major upgrades for Atlantic Packaging. Multi-million dollar upgrades of The Wauregan, Otis Library and the Mercantile Exchange Building took shape during Strickland's tenure.

"I remember Norwich of the 1950s and 60s when it was very vibrant, but the issues you have in downtown Norwich now, you've got a decaying city there, but I think they're trying to do everything in their power to do the right thing," Strickland said.

Enter business owners like Jill Fritzsche, whose soon-to-open Encore Justified shop at 102 Main St. was pointed to Tuesday night as an example of NCDC's evolving role in the community. In 2010, voters approved a \$3.38 million downtown revitalization bond package backed by city officials and then-mayor Peter Nystrom as a catalyst for bringing commerce back to the area.



Dodd Stadium was one of the projects of the Norwich Community Development Corp., which is marking its 50th anniversary. Bulletin file photo

Fritzche, of Canterbury, was approached by NCDC after setting up several window displays in the circa-1830s building she now occupies. They convinced her to open using dollars through the financing plan to help defray costs. Fritzche recently signed a seven-year lease that NCDC says will lead to more than \$54,000 in private investment over that time.

“The reason I like Norwich now is they’re not waiting for everybody to bail them out,” she said. “And the way NCDC is doing it right now, I think is so smart. They’re doing organic growth and investing in businesses themselves.”

Mayor Deb Hinchey, who presented a proclamation to NCDC on Tuesday, said city leaders were “desperately proud” of their partners.

“It is a very valuable piece of what we’re trying to do here in Norwich,” she said. “They have, over the years, brought such vitality to economic development here in the city.”

Witte’s walking stick — mounted on a wooden backing and kept for years by his friend and neighbor Dennison Gibbs, was gifted back to NCDC on Tuesday.

Fitting, said new NCDC board member Kathleen LaCombe, for an organization always finding new places to go.

“I see that NCDC has really evolved from where it started 50 years ago,” the Preston-based architect said. “It certainly appears there is outreach to bridge the gaps where they can and help businesses come into town while helping the development of properties that have been left vacant to complement the mission of Norwich.”

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