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Rebuilding a Village to Save It



Douglas Healey for The New York Times

19TH-CENTURY AMBIENCE Southport Green will have a mix of homes and office condominiums and an inn. It is being built by a group formed by Southport residents. By LISA PREVOST

SOUTHPORT

STUART BALDWIN and his wife, Harriet, had lived here for only two years when a developer proposed an 80,000-square-foot office building just off Interstate 95 at the main entry point to this historic harbor village.

An old-money section of the town of Fairfield that has studiously preserved and artfully upgraded its 19th-century village ambience, Southport reacted as though it was under assault — with Mr. Baldwin, though a newcomer, leading the charge.

A mortgage banker who had focused on inner-city renovation projects in nearby Bridgeport, Mr. Baldwin approached Southport's fiercest guardian, the Sasquanaug Association, and suggested that rather than simply fight the office plan, they buy the vacant 4.4-acre site and develop the property themselves.

"We passed the hat and, Southport being the place it is, \$6.5 million fell in," enough to outbid the office builder, he said.

Six years later, Mr. Baldwin and his fellow investors have finally snipped the ribbon celebrating their own development, Southport Green, a high-end mixed-use community designed as a traditional neighborhood around a common green.

The product of local brainstorming sessions, countless public hearings and often-heated negotiations, the \$75 million Southport Green project represents an extraordinary outcome in a section of town notoriously resistant to development.

In addition to 28 residences, Southport Green includes what is believed to be the state's first "condotel" — a condominium hotel — called the Southport Village Inn, as well as a day spa, six office condominiums with 13,000 square feet of space, and La Colline Verte, a highly rated French restaurant that is relocating from another part of Fairfield.

The development, scheduled for completion by the end of the year, is a block from Southport's Metro-North train station, and one block more to the shops and restaurants in the village.

While the residential portion of the project caters to the needs of older Southporters who no longer want the burden of maintaining a house, its developers say, the inn is an attempt to increase Southport's visibility and appeal. "Whether Southport is a sufficiently elegant and interesting destination remains to be seen," said Landon Storrs, a Southport resident who is an investor in the project.

A busy shipping center during the 19th century, Southport is a residential neighborhood closely identified with its small-town village center, picturesque harbor and quiet beaches. A portion of the village with a rich collection of landmark-quality structures is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Southport's "sense of timelessness" guided the planning of Southport Green, Mr. Baldwin said, noting that investors were keenly aware that they would have to live with the consequences in their backyards.

The 28 town houses, single-family residences and single-level penthouses are in 12 buildings individually designed to reflect the Greek Revival, Italianate, Victorian, Georgian and federal style influences found throughout Southport. The interiors are equally detailed, with random-width red oak flooring, crown molding and marble baths standard in all units.

Prices start at \$1.7 million for a 2,157-square-foot single-level condominium, and range upward to \$3.25 million for a 4,152-square-foot, two-floor town house. Eight smaller one- and two-bedroom units are available for less than \$1 million.

The setting is old [New England](#), with front porches facing a central green. Sidewalks are the only connections between buildings.

The inn serves as the community hub. In addition to collecting their mail at a postal desk in the main reception area, residents will have access to the inn's concierge and room service, provided by La Colline Verte.

All of the inn's 27 rooms and 12 suites are for sale, fully furnished; prices are \$350,000 to \$450,000. When the owners are not using them, the rooms will be available for nightly rental, with the owners sharing the revenue.

The condotel concept is a "hugely popular trend" in major cities and resort areas, said Jonathan Wise, the general manager of the Delamar Hotel in Greenwich and vice president for hotel development of the Greenwich Hospitality Group, which will manage the inn. The concept could work in Southport, he said, if the inn delivers a very high level of service and provides guests, who will pay \$275 to \$350 a night, easy access to the area's beaches and cultural attractions.

"We will provide whatever services the guests require," Mr. Wise said. "If someone needs a helicopter back to [the Hamptons](#), we'll arrange it."

Gallery space off the main reception area will reinforce the feel of historic Southport, with seasonal exhibitions of American art on loan from leading galleries around the country. Philip Eliasoph, a professor of art history at [Fairfield University](#), will curate the exhibitions, which begin next January with a presentation of works in affiliation with the Adelson Galleries of New York.

Mr. Eliasoph, who also works as a consultant, said he had approached Mr. Baldwin with the gallery idea because he believes it will help create "a sense of place" and create a "harmonious tone" with the community. "When people come to a place having outstanding works of art," he said, "it becomes part of the collective memory and the identity of the place."

Except for the day spa, retail space is deliberately absent from Southport Green, a concession to residents who voiced concern at a planning forum that the project could hurt village merchants.

The investors also eased opposition by negotiating a deed restriction with the Sasquanaug Association that prohibits additional building on the property.

Not everyone was satisfied. Some residents denounced the investors in the project, “saying all kinds of things, saying we were in it for the profit,” Mrs. Storrs said.

But she said that was not the case. “I don’t know if I’ll ever see our money,” she added. She and another of the 26 original investors began inviting their critics to tea, and attempted to raise the level of discourse between sips.

Mr. Baldwin, who is now the managing member of Southport Green, acknowledges that in addition to enduring a lengthy approval process and spending \$3 million to remove contaminated soil from what was previously a storage yard for earth-moving equipment, the owners did “a ton of social networking.”

The quality of the architecture should reassure the remaining critics, Mr. Baldwin said, noting that a recent guest at Southport Green’s ribbon-cutting had asked what was going to happen to the lovely old Italianate building on the site. The building, the guest was informed, is brand new.

“My hope,” Mr. Baldwin said, “is that 50 years from now, someone walking through Southport Green will assume this is another beautiful part of Southport that developed organically along with the rest of the town.”