

LIVING DOWNTOWN: A Brief History

Recognition of Ten Years of Corning's Upper Floor Housing Initiative

E Johnson-Schmidt

In 1974, Market Street Restoration Agency (MSRA) was established to guide the revitalization of downtown Corning following the flood of 1972. The Agnes flood for many residents is the key historical moment of the 20th century for the City. After the flood, many communities began widespread demolition of their downtowns, seeing the flood's devastation as a route toward "urban renewal." Corning took a different approach, relying on a movement toward historic preservation which had begun before the flood to keep the City's character in place. As its downtown evolved into a restoration project that was later emulated by communities across the country, Market Street Restoration was modeled by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the creation of its National Main Street Program and the Main Street Manager concept. Now known as one of the very first downtown revitalization projects in the United States, Corning's renewal, led by Norman Mintz working together with the merchants, business and property owners became the gold standard for revitalizing an historic downtown.

In the early 1980's, Corning Enterprises joined the effort at the forefront of this transformation providing vision, leadership and resources to the community. However, what started as a restoration initiative from the flood soon blossomed into a collaboration of agencies working on advancing the economic development, quality of life and historic preservation of Corning's downtown. In the late 1980's Corning Enterprises led the way in revitalizing Corning's downtown by recruiting major retailers to Market Street such as Bass Shoes, VanHeusen, Dexter, and Rubbermaid while facilitating city locations for the Wegman's (the first store outside the Rochester area), the Corning Credit Union headquarters and the Corning Children's Center.

In 1995, MSRA felt that it was important to continue its leadership role in main street revitalization by illustrating the vitality garnered in a downtown by revitalizing its upper floors for residential use. It was also vital to historic commercial buildings which require maintenance as they age. Income garnered from first floor space is inadequate income to support the health of two and three story buildings that are vacant upstairs. Rehabilitation to develop upper floors and produce income to support the aging infrastructure of old buildings became necessary to the health of the downtown. Over the next five years, MSRA Executive Director Elise Johnson-Schmidt rallied the support of the City, State Building Code officials, Corning Enterprises, Three Rivers Development and the property owners to build the necessary support to embark upon the development of upper floors for market rate housing. Corning knew that to create a sense of neighborhood in the downtown Corning had to make it an attractive place to live and took the lead on assembling a team of community leaders and merchants to develop a downtown repositioning plan.

The result was a comprehensive strategy that consolidated the resources of several agencies and created a single vision for the future of the downtown and the establishment of Corning's Gaffer District. James R. Houghton, CEO of Corning Incorporated (and the Preservation League of NYS's first Pillar Award recipient), together with MSRA hosted meetings with key property owners, to discuss and champion how it could successfully embark on its first project. It was felt that if MSRA could work through obstacles such as resident parking, development cost, historic building code issues and preconceived ideas about living above businesses, it could complete one project and others would follow. Over the course of the next four years, Elise procured the support of numerous entities that included the following:

- Three Rivers Development provided the funding for MSRA to complete a feasibility study and renderings for illustrating the rehabilitation of five buildings on Market Street;
- The City agreed to allow permitted parking for Market Street residents;
- With the idea that the Upper Floor Living initiative would be used as a prototype for developing upper floor space in downtowns, the State Building Codes Division agreed to be flexible in its interpretation of the building code by providing variances if the intent of the code was followed;
- Corning Enterprises agreed to sponsor the cost of the sprinkler system and elevator in an effort to reduce costs to make the project financially viable since no grants existed for this type of work; and
- Market Street Restoration Agency offered to provide architectural services at no cost to the building owner to assist in creating a prototype project that was financially viable.

After four years of planning, meeting with State officials, building owners, corporate leaders and city officials, property owners, George and Barbara Connors (45-49 East Market Street) agreed to develop the upper floors of their building as Market Street's first market rate apartment project. The Connors' negotiated to establish:

- A long-term lease by Corning Incorporated for a portion of the apartments to reduce the financial risk; and
- A five-year lease for the first floor retail commercial tenant, in this case, Eckerd Drug Store.

During this time, a substantial structural failure occurred prior to the commencement of construction, as a result of a hidden collection of rainwater beneath the roof and above the ceiling, further underscoring the necessity for maintenance and income to support the aging infrastructure of old buildings – even ones well cared for by their owners. A similar failure occurred in a neighboring community that resulted in the building's demolition, since the owner had inadequate funds to make the repairs. Consequently, a significant old building was lost and a major gap resulted in the built environment of a downtown – something that could have occurred in Corning as well. Instead, the Connors' invested \$100,000 to make the repair prior to commencing construction of a sensitively designed and implemented rehabilitation project.

After another year of planning and design, construction began, and in November of 2001, the first four apartments were completed. The building was beautifully rehabilitated in keeping with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation by maintaining the open space of the original third floor dance hall that included an outdoor terrace for the third floor apartment above the two-story portion of the building. Each apartment was designed and completely furnished in a unique style to depict a different historic character and to entice members of the community to live downtown. An open house to show the apartments to the community was enthusiastically attended by over 500 people.

Now, over 10 years later, there are over 50 market rate apartments, abundant additional quality apartment spaces and apartments are at 100% occupancy. Rarely is there availability and Corning's success is once again being watched by downtown revitalization professionals and nearby communities. As has been shown by the Connors' pilot project, living downtown breathes new life into communities: it creates a 24-hour presence, stimulates the creation of new nighttime businesses, creates vibrancy in a community, provides income to maintain the buildings, and elevates the quality of life. Corning's success is highlighted in a workshop given in communities statewide since 2004 by the Preservation League of NYS where Elise Johnson-Schmidt, now in private practice as a preservation architect (in a revitalized building on Market Street which also houses one of the completed market rate apartments on Market Street) illustrates many of the upper floor housing projects in Corning that have been completed since 2001. Each of the projects illustrated in this nomination designed by J-S&A has been completed utilizing the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, and represents 20 of the apartment units created on Market Street since 2001. These include:

- The rehabilitation of Connors' (45-49 E Market)
- The Henkel Block (72 E Market)
- Klugo Development (91-99 E Market)
- The J-S&A office/apartment (15 E Market)
- Sorge's Restaurant & Apartments (66-68 W Market).

These projects utilized funds from Restore NY, the Historic Preservation Tax Credits and/or NY Main Street – vital funding to the success of the projects.

Since 2006, Pam Weachock, who rehabilitated her building on Market Street to include an apartment above her store, has organized an annual Apartment Tour on Market Street to illustrate "Living on Market Street" and donates proceeds to benefit various community not-for-profits. Her tour is a wonderful example of how collaborative efforts strengthen an initiative to be greater than the sum of its parts.

The City of Corning, Steuben County and the Corning-Painted Post School District recently adopted Tax Law 444-a (the Ithaca Bill) which has successfully been used by several property owners to reduce the cost of rehabilitating upper floor space and is used to help encourage property owners to undertake revitalization projects. Steve Dennis, Director Planning and Economic Development, championed this initiative along with the developer of 72 E Market Street, JD Young, in order to encourage revitalization. This graduated property tax increase allows property taxes to

be maintained at their pre-development level for five years, and then increases 20% each year six through ten to their adjusted post-rehabilitation level. This is another example of how collaboration successfully supported success.

At the heart of this initiative today is Dawn Burlew of Corning Enterprises whose efforts have successfully guided projects and brought them to fruition to benefit Market Street's vitality and ensure its future. In addition to her work to further develop and strengthen the resident base on Market Street, Dawn works with businesses to develop viable new retail opportunities for Corning's downtown – especially those that complement the residential tenants that now live on Market Street. Her latest success is a Tommy Hilfiger Store which opened in December (the first of its kind) and has elevated the quality of retail and the downtown experience for visitors and residents alike. Dawn works with prospective building owners to successfully undertake rehabilitation projects by guiding owners to:

- develop a business plan;
- guide the process;
- assist them with identifying appropriate available buildings for their business ventures and negotiate through building issues; and
- assist with securing grant funds to attract developers to undertake such major projects as the rehabilitation of unused buildings into luxury apartments and quality retail space.

This effort is fundamental to the success and growth of Market Street as a viable, vibrant, dynamic downtown where people want to live, work, recreate, shop, dine and relax. Just as importantly, it continues the legacy of Market Street as a leader in downtown revitalization in the 21st century.

As we mark 40 years since the devastating Flood of 1972, twenty years since the selection of James R. Houghton as the first recipient of the Preservation League of New York State's Pillar award, and ten years since the completion of the first market rate apartments on Market Street, we feel that it would be appropriate to recognize the success and accomplishments of those involved in the evolution and development of this upper floor initiative with an Excellence in Historic Preservation Award.