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## Condo conversions turning Lynn center into bedroom community

By **David Liscio / The Daily Item**

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DAILY ITEM OF LYNN TOOLS



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**L**YNN -- Downtown Lynn is rapidly transforming from a center of urban decay to a vibrant neighborhood with new stores, restaurants and, perhaps most importantly, people, the latter thanks to nearly a dozen projects in which old industrial buildings are being converted into residential condominiums.

Architects call this wave of construction adaptive reuse. City planners refer to it as smart growth. Tax collectors see a new revenue stream, and would-be residents claim it's among the best real estate deals going in Greater Boston, particularly since the condos are so close to the central train and bus station. The ocean and the 2,300-acre Lynn Woods Reservation are also nearby, as is Logan International Airport.

In recent weeks, Munroe Street has been nearly impassable, clogged with workmen's trucks as plasterers, plumbers, electricians and painters put the final touches on several condo-conversion projects. Most of the model units have been completed and in some buildings, such as the Boston Machine Lofts on Willow St., residents moved in several months ago.

According to Peter DeVeau, executive director of the Lynn Economic Development and Industrial Corp., the city agency that assists investors by providing tax agreements and other services, the condominium conversions done over the past year, currently under construction, or in the late planning stages, represent a \$50 million investment in the downtown business district.

Mayor Edward Clancy Jr. described the turn of events as a rebirth. City Council President James Cowdell tagged it a renaissance. The Lynn Area Chamber of Commerce named John McGrail, principal of The Mayo Group, as its person-of-the-year because the company has purchased and rehabbed more than a dozen buildings in the central business district.

In addition to The Mayo Group, the condo conversions are the work of several key developers, including Oasis Development Enterprises, Resource Capital Group (RCG), Montreal Investments, and smaller players like Lowell Gray, founder and former owner of the Internet company Shore.Net, and now proprietor of the new Oxford Street Grill, which features three condominiums on the building's upper floors. Unit prices range from the high \$100,000s to more than \$400,000. While such numbers can cause sticker shock in first-time homebuyers, to many Boston renters looking for a place to call their own, Lynn is the place.

Boston Machine Lofts at 13 Willow St. was a front-runner as RCG transformed the historic structure into 35 loft-style luxury condominiums. The project was immediately held up as a model of success. City officials and real estate developers were quick to notice the condo dwellers were young and upscale, some driving Jeeps with surfboards on the roof rack. These were strange yet welcome sights for the blue-collar city with its tired downtown.

Matt Picarsic, the Boston Machine Lofts project manager, said RCG already has begun converting the former Franklin Street firehouse into 15 condominium lofts.

The 15 residential units and four commercial spaces created by developer Jonathan Bedard at 90 Exchange St., across from The Edison office building, were also among the pioneers as the condo conversion trend swept over the downtown.

Other ongoing projects include the Sloan Machine Lofts, 32 units in a former industrial building on Essex Street, directly across from the Lynn District Courthouse.

Picarsic said the condos created in the former firehouse will be priced in the same range as the Sloan project.

The Mayo Group is also moving forward with its Central Square Condominiums, 1-21 Central Square, a project that includes 15 condos as well as retail storefronts near the corner of Central and Union streets.

Oasis Development Enterprises is rapidly selling the 19 condominiums in the Sherry Building at 70 Munroe St., while Montreal Investments is making strides converting 16 units on the other side of the street in the former J&N Appliance Co. building.

The Keith Building, a Mayo Group project in yet another Central Square historic structure, recently became home to the Gulu Gulu Café, which features loft-style condos on

the upper floors.

At least 35 condominiums are planned in a former industrial building on Mount Vernon St., near the rear of The Daily Item. The project was stalled but local real estate investors indicated the property will soon have a new owner and developer.

The condo conversions were precipitated, in part, by a City Council vote that changed the zoning code so that parking was no longer required when constructing and selling a residential unit.

City Development Director Harold McGaughey said a workshop or charette aimed at developing a master plan for the business district and a strategy for connecting it to the downtown also played a role, as did the city's installation of brick sidewalks, decorative street lamps, and an atomic clock in Central Square.

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