

Main Street 2.0

Wilton, New Hampshire: Finding its Heartbeat

A small New Hampshire downtown fights back rising tide of online shopping, absentee landlords and years of Main Street vacancies

BY MELANIE PLENDIA / PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MOORE

A stranger who happened upon Wilton's Main Street might wonder what happened here. Where are the stores? The bank? The people?

No signs lead to downtown. Many of the storefronts are vacant, some for years. The parking is troublesome and what could be a river view from Main Street is blocked by, well, Main Street.

Wilton has a lot of challenges. A lesser town might pull up stakes and give up.

Wilton is not a lesser town.

"I'm not a patient woman," says Jennifer Beck, a retired corporate marketing executive, who is heading up the Wilton Economic Development Commission. "In five years I want a lot of the stuff we're talking about to be done."

AN OPTIMISTIC VISION

In Beck's vision, by 2023, young people are spilling out of various social gathering places, pubs and bistros. Tourists are catching the

scenic railroad from town and heading to Bennington after a day of shopping. Artists are holding exhibit openings in galleries tucked into the Wilton Falls Building overlooking the river. Meanwhile, lovers are strolling the Riverwalk, as street-side guitar players add the soundtrack.

It's not that Beck, or anyone else on these projects, don't see the problems. They do, and they'll tell you about them in great detail, without hesitation.

"One of the problems that Wilton is facing is that things have been pretty much stagnant. We have about a 35 to 40 percent vacancy rate along our Main Street as far as storefronts go ... The only strong thing we have here quite frankly is the Wilton Town Hall Theater. That's probably the most active business in town," says Scott W. Butcher, town administrator for the Town of Wilton.

"We don't have any good dining restaurants in town, we don't even have a convenient place to buy a gallon of milk," he admits. "We don't quite have that — we are very much residential about 69 percent of our land is either conservation land or tied up in current use, so we have 31 percent of the residential properties supporting the entire tax base for the town."

But they will also tell you just as quickly and just as easily what the town has in spades.

"There is a tremendous amount of potential here," says Butcher, who is in his first year as the first-ever town administrator. "We have

some buildings that with the proper types of investment could be turned into productive facilities," he says. "And we have an economic development committee that's been working extremely hard over the last year and a half or so gathering information and starting to plot out the direction for Wilton so that we can attract new businesses."

WHAT WILTON ONCE WAS

The town wasn't always this way. Wilton was a bustling mill town the way 70-year-old Dick Putnam tells it. His family has owned Putnam's Clothing shop on Main Street since he was four years old.

"Everybody walked to work and the businesses that were on the Main Street served the local clientele," says Putnam. "There was clothing, hardware, banking, jewelry, a shoe shop and seven markets within walking distance: two chains and all the independents and a couple of restaurants. So you know it was a full-fledged little village Main Street that had a lot going on."

And it remained that way up until the 1970s. But at that point, the manufacturing base "evolved" Putnam says, and commuting became more the norm. Along with that, the demographics of this now bedroom community also started to age and change.

The 80s and 90s found the town trying to adapt to fits and starts in the market. Putnam, for example, started selling magazines and penny candy after the newsstand went out of business.

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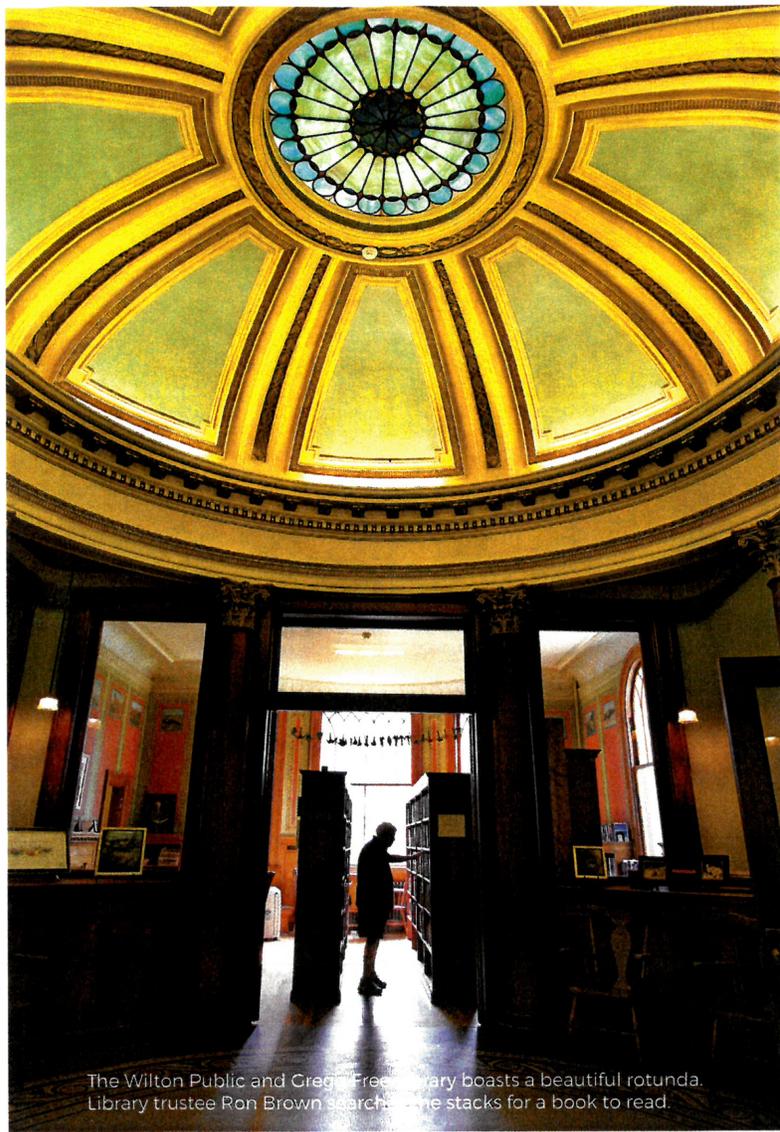
 

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The Wilton Public and Gregg Free Library boasts a beautiful rotunda. Library trustee Ron Brown searches the stacks for a book to read.

“These things have no business in a men’s clothing store, but we were doing what we could to stay afloat,” he says.

Changes in banking and insurance also had a big impact on this town. Mergers among insurance companies and consolidations in banking left two gaping vacancies along Main Street in the past decade that have yet to be filled.

And for that matter, retail itself started changing, he says, as more and more consumers are shopping with the tips of their fingers instead of in person.

“Even my shop is a dinosaur; I’m nursing it through to the end,” he says. “And I’ll be honest with you the building is informally, and soon to be formally, for sale. ...So that’s the evolution that’s occurred. It’s really nobody’s fault, it’s just the way it is, and here we are.”

FIGHTING THE TIDE

But not even Putnam (who slyly points out that anyone looking to create a cute little boutique in a pristine 1820s style building would do well snapping up his shop) is willing to let Wilton rest where it is.

About a year ago, more or less, the town formed an economic development commission to tackle the issue and breathe life back into the town. The group was meant to focus ideas and spur some action for change since previous efforts had pretty much gone nowhere for lack of either.

Beck, “a retired firebrand” as Putnam calls her, came out of retirement.

“You get to a point in your life where you go, ‘so what’s your purpose?’” says Beck. “How do you make the world a little better for the fact that I’ve been here, not worse?”

It turns out saving Wilton fits that bill for Beck.

And in just a year, the group has brought three warrant articles to town meeting, interviewed all the business owners in town, surveyed residents, commissioned a business retention study with the University of New Hampshire and a design charrette with Plan New Hampshire and, along with the Nashua Regional Planning Commission, is working on a project that focuses specifically on attracting businesses to Main Street.

“So we’re moving pretty quick,” says Beck.

As the results of these studies come back, a picture is emerging of a town that, as Beck explains, wants to keep its rural and historical character, while becoming more vibrant with a diverse, solid mix of businesses and industries that will allow the town to be resilient in the face of changes in the economy well into the future.

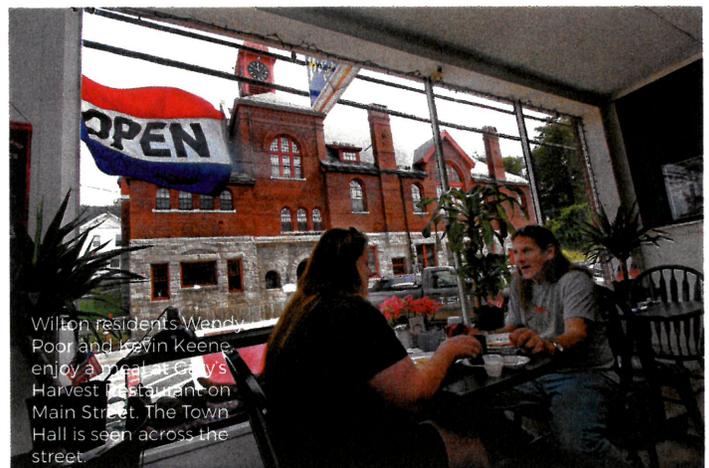
“We want to see what we can do to try to attract businesses here and, more importantly, the patrons to support those businesses,” says Butcher. “I think it’s going to take a lot of the data that we’ve already collected and start to look at ways that we can improve the downtown area.”

One of the first things they’ve done is broadened their definition of downtown, Beck says, defining it as the nearly two-mile stretch through town that starts at Carnival Hill near the town’s conservation land and community garden, up to Route 101, which includes the town’s railroad tracks and the river that runs through town — a confluence of Stony Brook and the Souhegan — and out to the Milford town border to Intervale Machinery & Supply.

“So included in that is residential, commercial and industrial zones. It’s where 1,000 of the 3,600 people in town live,” says Beck. “It’s where a lot of our big beautiful old homes are; it includes mill buildings and most of our schools. So it’s really the heartbeat of downtown.”

Once they established the boundaries of downtown, town officials got to work, looking for grants and tax opportunities that would incentivize building owners to facelift some of the tired-looking facades in town.

“We had some very creative things come out of the design charrette,” notes Putnam. “It was good to get some fresh eyes on the



Wilton residents Wendy Poor and Kevin Keene enjoy a meal at Gals Harvest restaurant on Main Street. The Town Hall is seen across the street.

physical bones of the town, which have got some really great potential. ...I've been saying it for years, Wilton is a diamond in the rough. It's got good bones."

ABSENTEE LANDLORDS

Within this challenge, however, lies another: A good chunk of Main Street's square footage is owned by out-of-town landlords, some of whom haven't shown interest in renting out vacant space, let alone beautification.

For example, the Santander Bank on Main Street, with the exception of an ATM, is vacant and has been for years. The owner is out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Butcher says, and that owner along with some of the other out of town owners, "quite frankly don't really care what downtown Wilton looks like. They are only looking at it from a cash flow or profit standpoint."

In fact, the town reached out to the owner of the Santander building — who also has failed to keep up the inside of the building — seeking input and information.

"Santander is basically paying the building's owner to sit vacant," says Butcher. "So they're tied into a lease until 2020. So from that standpoint, there's no effort to find a new tenant. From a property owner's standpoint, they're not losing anything by having the building sit there. So that's part of the frustration of dealing with people who don't have a vested interest in the community."

Putnam has stronger words for it than lack of interest.

"About 10 years ago this year it was abandoned," says Putnam. "That's 13,000 square feet of retail banking space that could have been creatively used, but was just shuffled off. I felt from the beginning, and I feel now, that we have been held hostage by that empty building."

So, they've taken it upon themselves to make change where they can. In March, the town passed Chapter 79E, a state program that allows towns to give property tax relief to people who make certain investments in improving their buildings whether it's residential or commercial.

Butcher says they are also in the process of identifying the commercial and industrial sections of town that they want to turn into revitalization zones, again through state programs such as one that gives companies some tax relief for creating jobs.

RIVERWALK & SIGNAGE & THE SEARCH FOR A TRAIN NUT
Another initiative is focused on bringing people into town to frequent those businesses they are hoping to attract: The Riverwalk project, which kicked off Sept. 29, 2017.

The walk starts at the police station, connects to a bridge at the head of Main Street where there will be a scenic overlook. From there, pedestrians can meander down to Main Street through the downtown to Main Street Park and out toward the mill yard, eventually ending at the Riverview Arts Building. Beck says the project really will be about putting in benches, plantings and signage directing folks downtown to enjoy both Main Street and the river.

Signage is also going to play a pivotal role in getting people to Wilton. One of the major hurdles Wilton faces is the fact that Route 101 bypasses the town — causing drivers to literally pass right by.

The town also admittedly hasn't done a great deal to help people

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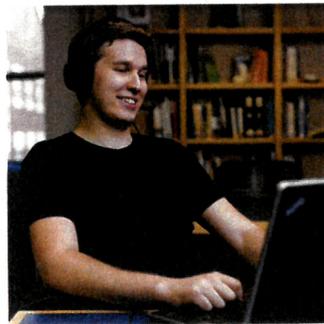
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identify the downtown business district once they do actually get there.

“Signage is a big thing,” says Putnam. “And we’re going to start with a big sign that says, ‘hey, you’re in Wilton.’ Since most people don’t even know that’s the town they are driving through.”

Beck explains that the signage will direct people not only into town but to specific businesses downtown. In addition to signs, officials are also creating a more unified online presence and marketing campaign to attract and inform potential residents and businesses.

As part of that branding exercise, Butcher says they are trying to find ways to leverage their assets, such as the Wilton Town Hall Theater. The historical movie house, Butcher says, is the one thing that consistently fills the parking spots on Main Street for not only first-run movies but classic silent pictures, shown complete with an accompanying live organist.

And, if past is prologue, they also believe that the train tracks skirting their town could be a boon for the town. From 2003 to 2005, Stuart Draper fulfilled a lifelong dream of running a railroad after he purchased two self-propelled rail cars that he used to take passengers up and down the Wilton-Bennington line.

“We were just beginning to see the value of it. It was bringing in people by the busload,” says Putnam. “It was immensely popular. ... And then he had the gall to go and die three years in. Anyway, after that, the train ceased to exist. ...So the search is on for a deep-pocketed train nut.”

Should they find such a nut, Beck already has a plan in place for accommodating tourists looking to stay overnight. Recognizing that they don’t have lodging in town and that getting lodging built in the next several years is not where the trend is heading, Beck says she’s encouraging residents to open up their homes to tourists through Home Away and Airbnb and the like.

“We have all of these beautiful historic homes,” she says, “Many of them with elderly residents who can’t afford to live there. This would help them, and it would solve the lodging issue.”

GLIMMERS OF HOPE

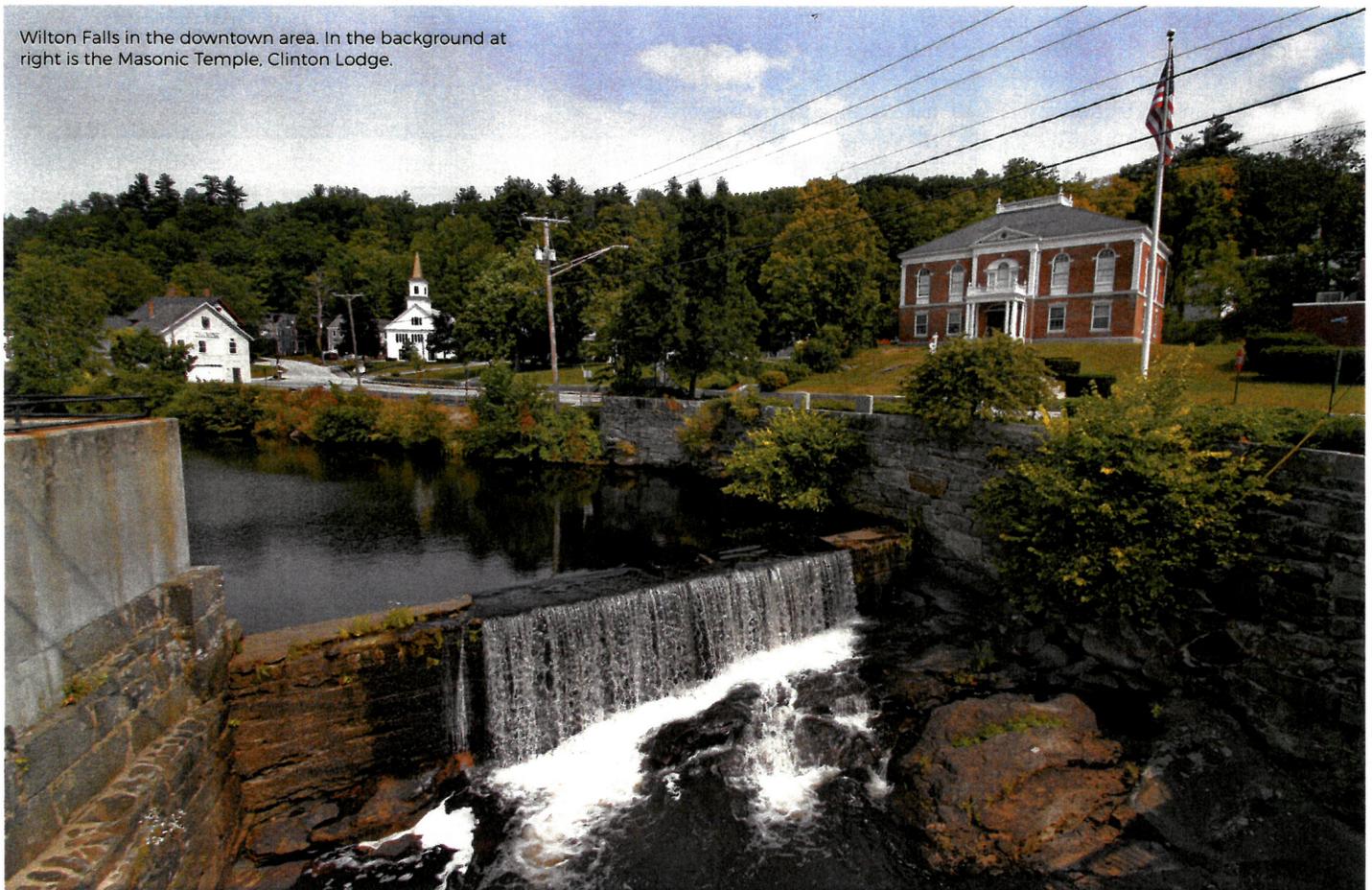
The town is seeing some movement, even if it’s ever so slight. Atlantic Prefab, Inc. — a company that manufactures building trusses — recently bought and moved into a large industrial building that used to be Pet Direct in the north end of town.

“They’re the first ones to occupy that structure in four years,” notes Butcher. “That building used to have about 200 employees in it and Atlantic Prefab started out with about 25 and I think they’re hoping to grow it to 50. So we’re still not at the level it was, but it’s a start.”

Until then, Wilton’s town and economic development officials are plugging away at the areas they can immediately impact and looking toward the future.

Butcher says they are continuing to navigate the complexities of “what comes first” when it comes to creating more affordable housing to bring families into town that have the skill sets that business-

Wilton Falls in the downtown area. In the background at right is the Masonic Temple, Clinton Lodge.



es need and trying to figure out that formula that's going to allow businesses to sustain themselves and give them a population with enough critical mass that they can survive long term.

He says they are also continuing to look at possible zoning changes that can make Wilton an inviting place for new business. And personally, Butcher says, he'd like to see the town bring in three or four solid businesses in the next couple of years.

"We are trying to get creative on some of things that we can do to make this a more inviting place," he says. "I myself think we need to get three or four sizeable businesses here to get the right critical mass of employees to support all the ancillary businesses, like dry cleaners, restaurants, etcetera."

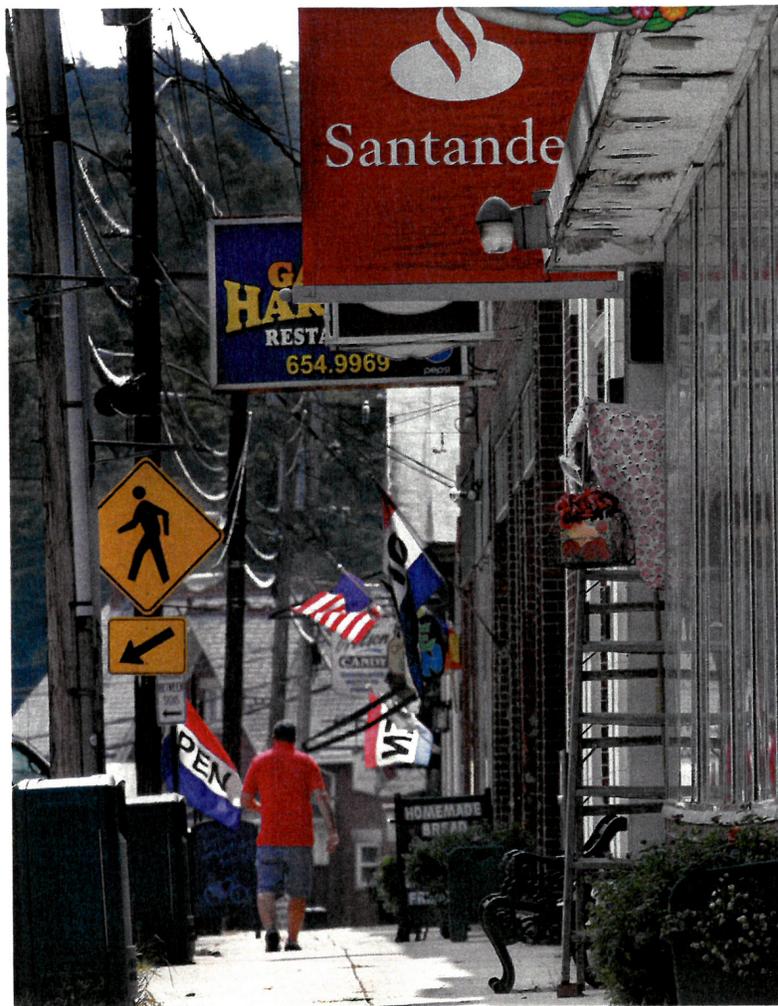
As for Putnam, he may be getting out of the clothing business, but he's not getting out of Dodge. He says he's hopeful things will get better, because after all, he adds, "they can't get any worse."

"We ain't to the point of selling off the whole town like they do out west," he says gently, as though he's talking about a friend who has hit hard times, "but sometimes it feels that way."

As for Beck, she leaves little room in her thinking for the notion of failure. For her, this is personal.

"I'm on a mission," she says. "I'm on a mission to save a town. How cool is that?" ■

Melanie Plenda writes from Keene, New Hampshire.



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