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Reinventing Waterville: Mike Roy and a host of Colbians rollup their sleeves as the city charts its future

Gerry Boyle
Colby College

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Reinventing Waterville

Mike Roy and a host of Colbians roll up their sleeves as the city charts its future



Mike Roy '74 can picture two Watervilles.

One is the humming, smokestack city where he grew up, a community built around mills and factories that churned out cloth, paper and fancy shirts, where downtown sidewalks teemed with shoppers and schools were filled to bursting.

The other is a city where the mills are still, or even gone, as are the big Main Street department stores. Hospitals and colleges are the biggest employers and Main Street is lined with restaurants and shops. There is an amphitheater on the riverfront, and the former Hathaway Shirt factory is home to boutiques and galleries, artists' studios and condos.

That is the Waterville Roy hopes to see in the not-so-distant future. And he isn't alone.

BY GERRY BOYLE '78
PHOTOS BY FRED FIELD

The former town manager in adjacent Oakland and a leader in statewide municipal organizations, Roy took over as Waterville's city administrator in October, trading a growing bedroom community for a shrinking milltown. Like many other cities in the Northeast, Waterville has seen most of its manufacturing jobs disappear over the past three decades, part of an industrial exodus that saw 19,000 manufacturing jobs lost in Maine in the last four years alone. That job loss has left cities like Waterville facing an uncertain future and officials searching for a new purpose.

Enter hard-working visionaries like Roy, who have filed the past away and are fixed unblinkingly on the future. "I still think the city can be the [region's] cultural and commercial center," Roy said, "but it's much different. It will never go back to the way it was."

Older Colby alumni may well remember the way it was. The thriving Main Street shopping hub, with Levine's, Sterns Department Store, Dunham's, Waterville Hardware. Not surprisingly, those locally owned retailers are long gone, replaced by genera-

the lakes, but they expect the same services from the city. We've got to find a way to bring those people back."

LePage, general manager of the multi-million-dollar Marden's Discount store chain, sees the city's future in this way: small businesses will replace the big mills as important employers; tech-support and other companies, drawn by the region's reliable workforce, will locate to regional industrial parks (L.L. Bean has committed to FirstPark in Oakland, a cooperative venture funded by 24 towns throughout the region); shops, boutiques and cultural events will bring people to Waterville's downtown. Bottom line, says LePage: Waterville will exist to support its hospitals and colleges.

Enter Colby, with a deeply vested interest in seeing the city thrive. President William D. Adams, who sits on the boards of both local and regional economic development groups, calls the relationship "a two-way street."

"Clearly, strategically, Colby is important to Waterville," Adams said, "but the way the city and the region develop is a very

"I still think the city can be the [region's] cultural and commercial center," Roy said, "but it's much different. It will never go back to the way it was."

tions of discount stores and most recently by Home Depot and Wal-Mart. Waterville's downtown, like most in the country, was left with empty storefronts and acres of vacant office space.

The move to malls was paralleled by a move to the suburbs, in Waterville's case outlying towns like Oakland, Belgrade and Sidney. The double whammy of factory closings and suburban growth has cut the city's population from nearly 20,000 three decades ago to just over 15,000 today. As the city's property-tax base has shrunk, its tax rate has climbed. People don't live in Waterville anymore, said the city's tough-love mayor, Paul LePage. "They live out on

important part of how we ought to be thinking about the future of the College. This is all about how Waterville, and I would argue central Maine, reinvent themselves over time."

The reinvention is underway. And while Adams stresses privately and publicly that Colby isn't an economic development institution, the College is making significant contributions to the effort in a variety of ways.

Financially, Colby has supported economic development through everything from a \$500,000 commitment to construction of a "spec" office building at FirstPark, to its \$1-million busi-

ness loan fund, to sponsorship of the Maine International Film Festival and Waterville Main Street, a downtown development group. Contributions to civic groups and initiatives have totaled more than \$200,000 over the past four years.

In addition to Adams's involvement in economic development groups, the College plays a more nebulous but still significant role in helping the Waterville area grow

Ave Vinick, director of major gifts at Colby and president of Waterville Main Street, a chapter of a national organization that supports downtowns. Vinick says building support for his group's efforts bodes well for Waterville's downtown.



Karen Heck '74, community activist, outside her offices on Castonguay Square in downtown Waterville. Heck says the "creative economy" is more than a pipe dream in the city as small-business owners move into Main Street office space.

and prosper. When a major national corporation recently became interested in possibly locating a facility at FirstPark, local officials first showed it the business park.

The next stop on the tour? The Colby campus. "It was not uninteresting to this corporation that Colby is here," Adams said.

As this story was being written, that company was said to be weeks away from choosing from Waterville and two other locations in other parts of the country. Even without that major coup, Adams and others say the city is reviving. "There are a lot of people who care a lot about the town," he said. "In terms of civic spirit, I think there's a lot of energy."

Much of that energy is focused on Waterville's downtown, the city's historic and traditional center and a very visible barometer of economic outlook—good or bad. Ave Vinick, director of major gifts in Colby's college relations office, recalls arriving in Waterville in 1997, after working in London for the United World Colleges. Main Street had vacant storefronts that were complemented by the gray February day. "It was dismal," Vinick said.

But Vinick, who had worked with a successful riverfront rejuvenation effort in Hartford, Conn., plunged into civic life in Waterville—and there were plenty of opportunities. Vinick first served on the board of the historic Waterville Opera House and then became involved in Waterville Main Street, the local chapter of a national organization. Now in his third year as president of Waterville Main Street, Vinick said he feels momentum is building. "I definitely feel new energy, and I hear it from other people, which is the important thing," he said.

Vinick points to a recent \$100,000 grant for façade improvements, several new shops, including upscale women's clothing stores, an art gallery and school, a private language school and ongoing study of a plan to add elevators to improve access to second- and third-floor office space. All of it adds up to a city on the verge of a major revival, he hopes.

Waterville "has some selling points but you've got to have something that pushes it over the edge," Vinick said. "Not only is it cheaper [for housing] but look at this Main Street. It's happening. There's stuff going on. It's fun, it's pretty. It's got festivals, it's got a waterfront. I think you can really make a package."



For some the package is nearly in place; it's just a question of the word getting out.

Karen Heck '74 is a veteran of community-based nonprofits who now works with Associate Professor Lyn Mikel Brown (education and women's, gender and sexuality studies) to put on programs empowering area girls. Former president of the Waterville Rotary Club, Heck works from a high-ceilinged office on Castonguay Square, directly across from City Hall in the heart of downtown. Her partner, Bruce Olson '76, works a short distance away for a small energy-services firm that does work for industrial and commercial clients throughout the Northeast—all from cozy offices overlooking Main Street.

It's a business that doesn't have to be anywhere in particular, Olson said, but is quietly thriving in Waterville. "Nice office space, great location, and Waterville is a nice, understandable little town," Olson said.

"It's a great community, really," Heck said, over lunch at a picnic table on the square. "It's been on hard times for quite some time, but there's nothing left [to happen] that can kick us down."

The only direction left to the city is up, Heck says, and the often-hailed "creative economy" is the ticket.

Heck points to downtown shops and cafés and, more important, office space that is beginning to attract successful small business. "It's what people are craving in different parts of the country," Heck said. "Someplace that's safe, someplace that's beautiful, someplace that's affordable."

Prime example? Heck's upstairs neighbor, Pinnacle Development Group, a software development firm that employs seven full-time staffers and 20 to 40 freelance software contractors. Pinnacle President Pam Kick, a former financial officer in the healthcare industry, said her clients send employees to Waterville

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GHM AGENCY
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EXCEPT FRIDAY
8AM-9PM

20
100

20
100

Lisa Hallee '81, a major gifts officer at Colby and chair of the board of the historic Waterville Opera House. The Opera House is one of the keys to bringing people and business to the downtown, Hallee says.

for training from all over the country. "They love coming to Maine," Kick said. "They love coming to Waterville. . . . I take them up, show them the Opera House. They say, 'This is unbelievable.'"

The Waterville Opera House, the restored ornate theater upstairs in City Hall, is just one of the historic treasures of which the city can—and should—boast, says Lisa Hallee '81, a major gifts officer at Colby, chair of the Opera House board and a Waterville native.

In recent years, the Opera House board has shifted away from professional touring shows to local productions involving as many as 150 people in cast and crew. The shows, drawing actors from as far away as southern Maine, have been critical and commercial successes, Hallee said. "When we do a production, we draw on community resources," she said. "We give people a creative outlet."

The local business community also has responded, recognizing that the theater productions not only fill the Opera House but



supporter of the festival) volunteers may not be able to sustain the festival's growth. Support for cultural events like the film festival and the Opera House productions is tied to the health of the local economy, which needs a vibrant downtown to grow. Which comes first?

"I don't want to lend a somber note to it," said Adams, at Colby, "but Maine is pretty tough. The economic environment, the fundamental structural economic changes that have gone on

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also fill downtown restaurants and shops. The same goes for the Maine International Film Festival, now a nationally recognized 10-day event that draws thousands of moviegoers to the city each summer. Last summer, actor Ed Harris attended and was honored by the seventh annual festival for his work, which includes a starring role in the HBO film based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Empire Falls* by Richard Russo (former member of the English Department).

"I think what's happened with [the festival] has surprised all of us—just the extent of its growth," said Ken Eisen '73, co-founder of both the festival and Railroad Square Cinema, a local institution.

But Eisen warns that without continued—and ideally increasing—sponsorship from local institutions (Colby is a long-time

here over the last thirty or forty years. They're very tough and demanding."

He warns that "you can't think away the challenges" and that goals have to be real. "But I think imagination and foresight are important, too," Adams said.

That imagination may take the form of seeing the potential in the city's Kennebec River waterfront or seeing factories not as empty but as full of possibilities. Or in the case of Roy, the city administrator, it may mean taking a fresh look at how the city operates.

Roy said he hopes he can help move the city away from the sometimes acrimonious partisan politics that have hindered cooperation locally and, perhaps, discouraged involvement in city government. Both Roy and LePage, the mayor, look to regionaliza-



New Life: PAUL BOGHOSSIAN SEES POTENTIAL IN FORMER HATHAWAY SHIRT FACTORY

Where hundreds of shirtmakers once bent over clattering machines, footsteps now echo in cavernous, silent spaces.

This is the former Hathaway Shirt Co. factory, hard on the banks of the Kennebec River in Waterville. For some it is just one more empty building, a memorial to a bygone industrial age. For Paul Boghossian '76, the empty factory is brimming with potential.

Boghossian wants to turn the Hathaway factory into a complex of studios, living spaces, restaurants and retail shops. He can picture a boutique hotel, maybe banquet and meeting space, somewhere in the sprawling 230,000 square-foot building. While still in the formative stages, Boghossian's plan recently was selected by city officials over another developer's proposal for the city-owned site. They hope his enthusiasm is contagious.

"Look at that view," Boghossian said, looking from a fifth-floor window of the factory out over the shimmering Kennebec. "The view is extraordinary."

He first came to Waterville from Rhode Island to attend Colby. After returning to his home state, he went into business and now is involved in conversion of vacant mills in Coventry, a city that, like Waterville, grew up around the textile industry.

The industry began to die off in the Northeast decades ago, and now its long-vacant factories are being seen not as burdens but as homes to a new generation of artists, artisans and entrepreneurs. "I think the intent [for the Hathaway project] is to create cool, funky, edgy spaces, and people will want to come here for that," Boghossian said. "A crafts person who has gotten priced out of Portland and is

looking for live/work space. So think about what it costs for an apartment. Let's say six hundred dollars. For a hundred and twenty percent of that you could have a studio space to work in, and an apartment."

That's the idea, though Boghossian is quick to point out that thus far he has been going with his gut on the project. That isn't enough to bank on, he said. In October he was about to begin market studies to determine just how viable his plan might be.

"The biggest hurdle," he said, "is finding people to occupy the space. And figuring out a way to retrofit the space economically so that you don't get killed on it."

Still, the project clearly has a lot going for it, he said. The factory is in excellent condition and replete with architectural detail. It's not in some industrial wasteland but within easy walking distance of downtown Waterville and its shops and restaurants. It backs onto a restored river that offers beautiful views. And Waterville's central location offers quick access to Interstate 95 and markets to the south.

Boghossian hopes all of that will be enough to attract tenants who will start a new creative community in Waterville. That would be a boon to the city and, he emphasizes, a boon to Colby. That the College might benefit is no small consideration for Boghossian as he moves ahead with the project.

"This isn't likely to be the most fruitful project I've ever done," he said. "I know that right now. But if it succeeds in the way I envision it, it could be so important to Waterville and, of course, so important to Colby. . . . In the final analysis, it could be my greatest gift to Colby."

tion of services as necessary to lower costs and ease tax burdens. Waterville now shares a fire chief with Winslow, something that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. More cooperation is on the drawing board, and Roy points to FirstPark as a prime example of what can be accomplished when parochial thinking is shaken off.

"This may be a little daring," he said, "but I really think it's not unrealistic to think of Waterville and Winslow being one community someday."

Roy, a geology, biology and environmental studies major at Colby, looks to the riverfront project now getting underway and to the proposed renovation of the Hathaway mill (see accompanying story) as keys to the city's rebirth. "You think it's a liability and all of a sudden you say, 'Wow,'" he said.

Colby has contributed substantially to the efforts to rejuvenate the city, Roy said, but as a long-time city resident he thinks the

College's contribution might go beyond money. He points to a time when Colby faculty, administrators and others were active in city affairs. "Dean [Earl] Smith was on the City Council for many years," Roy said. "If Colby can help in any way to get people involved, then it becomes a much more vibrant community."

"By taking advantage of the resources out in the community, we become much stronger. Colby has incredible human resources. People have so much to offer. Oftentimes they just need to be asked."

And to be patient as they wait for results.

"I think what people have to realize is that just as the change from what it was to where it is now happened slowly, change that will bring it back also happens slowly," said Dan O'Halloran '80 of Boothby & Bartlett Company, an insurance company that has been on Main Street since 1859. "We're making some good, positive small steps."

At Colby, Adams described his prognosis as "modestly optimistic." He pointed to a then-looming statewide tax-cap proposal (subsequently defeated) as a potential burden on local government. But Adams, fresh from sessions with local economic-development groups, said other factors appeared to point to a city on the move—up, not down. "The successes are tentative and modest," Adams said, "but I think the direction is right."

Downtown Waterville, on the rejuvenated Kennebec River. The former Hathaway Shirt factory, bottom left, is being eyed for renovation into a complex of studios, shops, condos and galleries by Rhode Island-based developer Paul Boghossian '76. The city has begun development of the riverfront area, hoping to turn the vacant acreage into a place for business and recreation use.