

Agenda For Hartford In 2011

Jobs, partnerships: City must use its partners and its imagination this year

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Courant Editorial

The most important project in Hartford — for what it is doing and how it is doing it — is taking place at a building most people in the region have never seen.

The former M. Swift & Sons factory, once internationally known for its work in gold leafing, is tucked deep in the North End, just east of Keney Park on Love Lane. The formidable 19th-century brick building, which predates the neighborhood around it, has been closed since 2004. The Swift family has given it to the highly regarded nonprofit Common Ground, which is in the process of turning it into a mixed-use workspace, which could include craftsmen and craftswomen, small manufacturing, small business start-ups and, on the surrounding land or the roof, urban agriculture. Two historic homes on the property could become homes for teachers.

This points to what Hartford must do in 2011 — creatively use its existing assets to create jobs for city residents. The city has the highest rate of unemployment in the state, 15.4 percent in November, according to the state Department of Labor, and the lack of jobs drives many of the city's social and fiscal problems. One of the models Common Ground is studying for the Swift building, in Brooklyn, N.Y., has more than 300 people working in crafts, start-ups and light manufacturing.

The Swift project also demonstrates *how* the city must move forward, and that is with public-private partnerships. In addition to the Swift family and Common Ground, city officials, the state Department of Economic and Community Development, Capital Workforce Partners, the Northeast Neighborhood Revitalization Zone committee, Habitat For Humanity, the University of Hartford and the Hartford Preservation Alliance are all involved.

Mayor Pedro Segarra hopes to use the same model to move along such projects as Coltsville, Capewell and Downtown West (starting with the demolition of the embarrassing Capitol West building). Coltsville, in particular, offers a major upside; the restoration plan calls for a mixed-use community with 500 to 600 jobs and 500 residents.

Hartford cannot sustain itself on pipe dreams and transfer payments. The mayor must focus on improving the city's economy, and it appears that he is. Mr. Segarra told a MetroHartford Alliance gathering last week that he is searching for a development director who, as head of a

business development office, will champion business interests and focus on new commercial opportunities.

Although this should be done on a regional basis, grounded in regional revenue-sharing, Hartford must move ahead. In addition to recruiting business, the city has to improve the business climate. A key component will be tax competitiveness. For more than two decades, the city has put a cap on certain residential taxes and paid for it with a surcharge on commercial taxpayers. The hope was to increase homeownership. The cap/surcharge hasn't done that, but it has helped create a 30 percent vacancy rate in downtown commercial property.

The 15 percent surcharge began a five-year phase-out in 2006; this is its last year. The city has to have a tax system that is fair to homeowners but doesn't leave business owners in the lurch or encourage them to jump the border for substantially lower taxes. More business is the best way to lower business taxes.

The first step must be to control city spending so that less tax revenue is needed. The budget has risen every year since 2002-03, from \$422.4 million to \$544.4 million in the current fiscal year. That rate of increase is unsustainable.

Mr. Segarra initiated an early-retirement program that took 28 non-union employees and two elected officials last year, a move he said would save the city \$1 million. It was wrongheaded on many levels — to name two, history shows that early retirements don't save governments money, and the city has no business offering elected officials handsome early-retirement packages. Only voters do, by voting those officials out of office. (A fate that one of those officials, who was on special probation after being charged with a felony, fully deserved.)

Mr. Segarra and the council did take a step toward financial sanity by changing the age at which newly hired non-union workers can collect their pensions, moving it to age 55 for a partial benefit and 62 for a full pension. Now they must effect the same kinds of changes with unionized workers, some of whom have lavish benefits. The city and its unions must reinvent the workforce, as many private companies have done, and train fewer people to do more kinds of work. The city must also share more services with the region.

One of the city's most important decisions in 2011 will be the choice of a new school superintendent. Over the past five years, Superintendent Steven Adamowski has made remarkable progress with a reform program based on school choice, closing or overhauling failing schools and other measures. The Center on Reinventing Public Education, a Seattle-based think tank, praised the city's turnaround efforts in a report last week.

It is essential that the new superintendent keep the reform effort moving and not abandon it for some other theory. To that end, the city should also push the state Board of Education to eliminate citywide seniority in favor of school-based seniority for staff reductions. Under existing rules, the last hired are the first fired, as newer teachers are "bumped" by more senior ones from any school in the district. In the specialty schools that Mr. Adamowski has created — schools that require teachers to have special qualifications or training — this makes no sense. Principals of these schools have expended great effort assembling and preparing their staffs. To let anachronistic union rules break up these teams is not fair to the children.

Mr. Segarra has taken a number of positive steps after taking the place of disgraced former Mayor Eddie Perez. Mr. Segarra has worked to remove a major eyesore, the former H.B. Davis Building; he has paid attention to the parks and brought skating back to Bushnell Park. A downtown grocery store should encourage more people to live in the business district.

He is right to go after the University of Connecticut medical and dental schools for Hartford, where they should have been put in the first place, if the move makes sense for the university. And he's right to go after the UConn social work school as well; Hartford would be a great training ground.

In 2011, he should push the iQuilt plan, the arts-based revival focused on Bushnell Park and nearby arts and cultural institutions, with an eye toward infill housing and mixed-use development near the park. This is vital to creating the vibrant 24-hour downtown that should be the center of the city and the region.