

Business West Online

November 23, 2009 edition

The Hub of South County

This Eclectic Community Offers a Little Bit of Everything

By KATHLEEN MITCHELL

Great Barrington sits nestled in the southwest corner of Massachusetts, near the borders of Connecticut and New York. The town's 46 square miles of acreage are almost double the size of the average community in the Bay State, and with more than 7,000 acres of state forests, the views are fantastic everywhere in town, with majestic hills towering behind both sides of Main Street along the busy Route 7 corridor.

But Great Barrington is very different from other quiet towns in the southern Berkshires. Since it was incorporated in 1761, it has been the commercial and cultural hub of the area, offering shopping and professional services that don't exist anywhere else in the region.

"What makes us unique is that we have maintained all of the amenities that the Berkshires are known for, yet we are a big small city," said Town Manager Kevin O'Donnell. "We have everything that a big city has, only on a smaller scale."

Indeed, one can find all types of shopping and services, a world-class performing-arts center, countless art galleries, close to 50 gourmet restaurants, a diverse number of small businesses, the county courthouse, and even a small hospital within the town confines.

In this latest installment of its Community Profile series, Business West takes a look at the importance of Great Barrington to both the Berkshires and the geographic area known as South County, along with the partnerships town officials have forged during difficult economic times to ensure that it remains both a commercial hub and an upscale resort town for families who have used it as a retreat since the wealthy built summer 'cottages' there during the Gilded Age.

History Lessons

Great Barrington was named after English aristocrat Lord Barrington and became an important center of government and commerce during Revolutionary times. Settled in 1726, it was incorporated in 1761 and declared the county seat. During the early 1800s, it grew quickly into a manufacturing town, fueled by the Berkshire Railway, which helped position it as a major center of trade.

The town has long been divided into two sections. Housatonic sits on the north side. In its heyday, it was a booming mill village that provided employment for generations of townsfolk. In fact, Housatonic got its name from the Housatonic Manufacturing Co.

The other section of Great Barrington is centered around Main Street and the many businesses and shops there.

More than a dozen fires devastated the downtown area in the 1800s, but the town rebuilt itself from the ashes, and many of the mills continued to thrive. Monument Mills was one of the town's oldest manufacturers, producing world-renowned textiles and bedspreads. "It closed in 1953, and the town lost about 4,000 jobs," said Walter Atwood III, chair of the board of selectmen.

Today, some of Housatonic's old mills have been transformed into house offices, businesses, and apartments. "The complex of mills contains everything from a dance studio to Country Curtains," Atwood noted.

In the late 1800s, during the Gilded Age, Great Barrington became a respite for the wealthy in New York City who built summer cottages there. That tradition has remained, and the town is still considered a tony address for many from New York and New Jersey.

"Over the years, we have gone from a New England mill town to a second-home tourist community," said Atwood.

In recent years, the second-home market has been driven by Wall Street executives, and Atwood said many purchased them with cash. "As a result, we have a very low foreclosure rate. During the summer, these executives leave their families here and take the train to work," he said. "You see more people here from New York and New Jersey than you do from Boston." In recent times, there has also been an influx of people from Connecticut.

"We have an interesting dichotomy. We developed as a commercial hub for the Berkshires, but because of our proximity to New York, there is a strong New York influence here," O'Donnell said. "A lot of people come here for the day on the weekends."

It's an easy trip because every weekend a train runs from New York City to Dover Plains, N.Y., and from there, a bus takes people to Great Barrington.

"This has been a tourist area and second-home area since the 1860s," O'Donnell said. "But we have taken another step and made it the commercial hub for the South County area."

Along with unique shops and old-fashioned mom-and-pop-style grocery stores, Great Barrington boasts a Kmart, Big Y, and Price Chopper. It is also home to Butternut ski area, and its close proximity to Catamount Ski area in Egremont makes the town a busy place even during the winter.

"People bring their families here in the summer and enjoy hiking and great golf courses. When winter comes, they ski," Atwood said. "On any given day, we have double our population in town."

Along for the Ride

Tourism is a driving force for the many niche businesses in Great Barrington, which enjoy a single tax rate.

"All roads lead to Great Barrington," O'Donnell said, referring to the fact that Route 7 runs directly down Main Street, while Route 23 passes west to east through town, combining with Route 41 and Route 7 in the western part of town and with Route 183 in the eastern part of

town — which also follows a section of Route 7 northward from Route 23 before splitting toward the village of Housatonic.

People who drive along the Route 7 corridor often stop at the downtown shops which lure them with their unusual array of goods.

Still others seek out Great Barrington to enjoy the beauty of nature. “We have hiking trails galore spread over 3,000 acres of state-owned forest property,” O’Donnell said.

One of the main draws is the town’s restaurants, which offer a broad menu of choices. One can get sushi, Greek food, Thai food, and almost everything in between at almost 50 eateries.

Town officials are very aware of the importance of attracting and retaining upscale businesses. Actress Karen Allen has a clothing store there, and Jane Iredale, whose mineral makeup and cosmetics are sold in 40 countries, started Iredale Mineral Cosmetics, Ltd. in 1994 in Great Barrington and retains a downtown storefront.

Unusual toys can be purchased in two toy shops, and the town is replete with art galleries. “There is a very strong artistic community in Great Barrington and the area,” Atwood said. “We have it all here, from an Oriental rug store to a traditional mom-and-pop grocery which truly takes people back in time to the way stores were in the 1900s.”

Although Great Barrington has a few chain operations, O’Donnell said, it’s critical for the town to keep high-end stores on Main Street. “South County would not be a draw for high-end second homeowners if we had tacky-tacky tourist shops here,” he explained. “The average price of a home in Great Barrington is \$406,000, and many of them have great views. When these people are buying toys for their children or grandchildren, they want something different. They also want great art, and we have it here, along with many professional services, attorneys, and designers.”

He admits it takes imagination and creativity to maintain the town’s upscale commercial offerings and character. “We really have it all and want to keep building on that. But our real challenge is to maintain our position,” he said. “We realize we are a commercial and cultural hub, and how goes Great Barrington determines how goes South County. We feel a great responsibility every day as well as a great pride.”

Commitment to Partnerships

Town officials are committed to creating partnerships to bring in more tourists while retaining the town’s pastoral beauty. A recent example of success was the transformation of a tunnel whose walls were covered with graffiti. The tunnel begins at the edge of Town Hall property and connects to stairs that take people to the site of the old railroad station.

O’Donnell talked to a youth group, who agreed to paint murals on the tunnel walls, then got an insurance company to agree to help underwrite the cost of some of the needed supplies.

As a result, the entire project cost the town less than \$100. “That is embryonic of the type of partnerships we have here,” he said. “We are proactive about our partnerships in both mindset and approach as we realize they help our restaurants, hotels, and businesses.”

Another ambitious partnership will bring the Berkshire International Film Festival to Great Barrington for its fifth run in June 2010. The festival draws more than 3,000 tourists, and town officials got creative to accommodate its size and the traffic it brings to the downtown area.

They decided to empty the old fire station across the street from Town Hall so film-festival officials can decorate it and use it for a dance. "The space is normally used for inspections, health department operations, and to house public-works vehicles," O'Donnell said.

The festival's designers have agreed to leave the decorations up permanently, so "we will have a public building that looks like no other," O'Donnell said.

Since the town's Tri-Plex Theater and Mahaiwe Theater are not large enough to show all of the films, the library will be used as another site. In addition, the town hall board room will be the setting for lectures, while a celebration takes place on its lawn.

Another partnership was forged in August, when the fire department partnered with the Chamber of Commerce to host an antique auto show. The fund-raiser featured 150 vehicles, and half of them were parked on town property.

"People could walk up and down Main Street and see 150 antique cars within two blocks. We had a tremendous crowd," Atwood said, adding that the event was held on a Thursday night to stimulate business during the week.

"All of our partnerships are aimed at bringing more people to Great Barrington," O'Donnell said. "We take advantage of what we have and what is immediately on our doorstep. Although the economy has softened business and things are down, we haven't taken a dramatic plunge."

Ongoing Projects

During the past five years, the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center has undergone \$8 million in renovations, with great attention paid to preserving historic architectural details. The project was initiated by a group of locals in South County who wanted to restore it to its potential. "It was originally a place for vaudeville and in later years became a movie theater," Atwood said.

Today, the landmark, opened in 1905, draws close to 50,000 annual visitors and has been placed on the National Register for Historic Places. It hosts more than 100 annual productions that range from live shows to live telecasts and even has affordable Monday movies.

"It offers first-rate entertainment with performers such as Judy Collins, Robert Kline, and the Russian Ballet," O'Donnell said. "It is a tremendous draw for the South County area."

Another project in the works is the sale of the Searles/Brian School, which has sat empty for several years. River School Development of New Jersey is in the process of finalizing a purchase-and-sale agreement and plans to undertake a \$19 million renovation of the building, which will include 12,000 square feet of retail space, 19,000 square feet of office space, and 40 condominiums.

Although there is abundant land in the town, there are not many other viable options for developers. The old fairgrounds encompass 50 acres and are for sale, but the property contains wetlands and is close to streams.

The other available site is the old Searles Castle, which most recently served as a private school, sits on 80 acres, and has been for sale for several years with a price tag of about \$15 million.

There are also two or three acres north of the town's center that housed a automobile dealership until about a year ago.

But bringing in new businesses is not a focus for town officials. Instead, they are determined to maintain their standing as an attractive and upscale hub for the Berkshires and South County.

It's a place that truly does have it all — the beauty that only nature can command, punctuated by a plethora of high-end shops, restaurants, and a culture that has sustained and maintained the town's geographic destiny for generations.