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Lowell takes spotlight at city-renewal forum

By Dennis Shaughnessey, dshaughnessey@lowellsun.com
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LOWELL -- The thing that most impressed Alvin McKinley after a tour of Lowell yesterday was the renovation of the city's mills.

"Back home the question is, 'How quickly can we flatten them?' " said McKinley, director of the Chief Executives Forum of Belfast, Northern Ireland. "But here you are saying that these are an asset. They are part of what Lowell actually is, so how can we make the best of this asset and develop them for our benefit?"

McKinley is part of a contingent from Northern Ireland that is in town as Lowell plays host to a weekend conference on urban development with guests from Ann Arbor, Mich., Asheville, N.C., Milwaukee, Wis., and Portland, Ore. The 2010 Innovative Cities: Best Practices in Urban Development conference began with a walking tour of the the city.

"It's a tremendous opportunity for us to be held up as one of the innovative cities from across the country as well as Northern Ireland," said Assistant City Manager Adam Baacke. "It was a real pleasure to take the tour and show them the best that Lowell has to offer and what has been done, such as the Boot Mills to what will be done at the Hamilton Canal District."

The conference, which continues today and tomorrow at the UMass Lowell Inn and Conference Center, includes presentations from the various cities as well as concurrent discussion groups and a public forum convened by U.S. Rep. Niki Tsongas.

Last night, keynote speaker Adolfo Carrion Jr., former director of



Adolfo Carrion Jr., former director of the White House Office of Urban Affairs, called smaller cities the economic engine of the nation. Sun/Julia Malakie

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the White House Office of Urban Affairs, called smaller cities the economic engine of the American enterprise.

"You are not the Bostons or the New York Cities or the Miamis and Chicagos of America," Carrion said. "You are among the smaller cities, and it is not the role of the federal government to dictate what happens across communities in our country, but to support the efforts of communities to build stronger economies and create communities of opportunity."

A sustainable and responsible infrastructure platform that includes neighborhood development is the key to success, said Carrion, now regional director at the Department of Housing of Urban Development in New York City.

"Especially in those neighborhoods that have fallen behind," he said. "Those pockets of missed opportunities where we could have but didn't."

conference. Tsongas, who could not attend last night's dinner, addressed the group from Washington via a video message. She said it is fitting that Lowell would host the event.

"Lowell has a rich story to share," she said. "After the decline of the textile industry and a generation of stagnation, Lowell entered a period of renewal and renaissance in the late 1970s that continues today. Its revitalization was neither accident nor coincidence, but the result of an active coordinated effort by federal, state, local, nonprofit and private stakeholders to reinvent the city."

Mayor James Milinazzo, who serves as president of the Lowell Development and Financial Corp. and is a former executive director of the Lowell Housing Authority, pointed to the public-private partnerships that have been part of the

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city's success.

"You hear stories about the LDFC and Lowell Plan and other entities that have played a key role in the revitalization of the city," Milinazzo said, tipping his cap to the city's Planning and Development Office. "I would put them up against any other planning office in the United States, and as you tour the city and hear the stories about the changes that have taken place here, I hope that by Saturday, you will agree with that."

UMass Lowell Chancellor Marty Meehan said the next logical step would be to make the city a real college town, much like the cities of Cambridge, New Haven, Conn., Providence, R.I., Austin, Texas, and Madison, Wis. Meehan pointed to the role the university has played in Lowell, along with Middlesex Community College and the efforts of MCC President Carole Cowan.

"It's now time to merge the heart of the city with its higher-education institutions," Meehan said, adding that industries will come and go based on business cycles. "Companies will start up and move. But higher education is constant. We are the anchor. With higher education and education as a whole in the lead, Lowell has an opportunity to transcend the boom-and-bust phenomenon that has plagued its economic history. We are here to stay."

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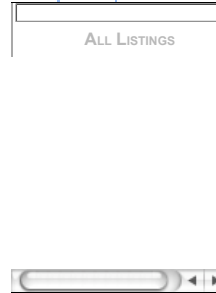
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