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## Claremont Rising

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

Name an Upper Valley city that has added over 700 new jobs, seen its building permits double each year in the last three years, increased its tax base, is preparing to add another national store (Lowe's) to an already impressive list that includes The Home Depot, Wal-Mart and Staples, and in an exemplary show of good governance converted a \$4,500 capital reserve fund balance into \$2.2 million. The answer is: Claremont.

Driven by a business-savvy city government, led by Mayor Scott Pope, City Manager Guy Santagate, and their planning and development staff, Claremont has begun a renaissance that will make it, "the coolest city in New England," Anthony Lyons, director of Claremont's department of planning and development, told me.

On your next visit to Claremont, I would urge you to pull into the parking lot of the new visitors center at the intersection of North and Washington streets. A few hundred yards below you, the Sugar River flows briskly and cascades over a waterfall. On the far side of the river, directly in front of you, are three shuttered Monadnock Mill brick buildings, and beyond that the city center, with its landmark City Hall capped by a pretty steeple.

The mill building in the center will become the next link in the regional The Common Man chain of restaurants, with 16,000 square feet and an open terrace that overlooks the cascading river. The building on its left, with 54,000 square feet, will be converted into business offices; and the building on its right will be converted to 47 condominiums. The conversions will restore and preserve the brick work, ceiling heights, wood floors, exposed timber columns and beams.

Work begins in October of this year, and is expected to be complete by the end of 2006, Santagate told me. The Mill Project, as it is called, will anchor the revitalization of Claremont's aging downtown, with its attractive Opera House Square. "That is just the beginning of nine major projects that are in various stages of completion," Santagate says. These include the White Mountain Children's Center; the Monadnock Park sports complex; the Syd Clark Commercial Park (120 acres), and the Way School Condominiums.

Claremont is the largest city in the Upper Valley, with an area of 40 square miles and a population approaching 14,000. "We have 120 miles of roads, our sewer and water infrastructure is only 50 percent used, we could continue growing for quite a few

years,” Santagate tells me. His excitement is contagious. A Boston banker by training, Santagate took over as city manager in August 2001.

“It wasn't a good year,” he says. The city had gone through four city managers; it was paying for current expenditures from its reserve fund to make up for a structural deficit; key positions including the city attorney, finance director, economic development director and planner were vacant; the tax rate was not generating needed revenue, there was no investment being made in infrastructure and relations with Concord were in tatters. The city council members were better known for turf warfare than for working for their city.

Pope was elected mayor in November 2003 on a platform that emphasized economic development, marketing and changing the city's attitude. Together with a much more constructive city council, the partnership of the new mayor and city manager began to reverse the situation.

“We bent over backwards to work with the governor and legislators in Concord,” Pope says. An early result of this partnership was legislation to aid small- and medium-size Claremont businesses. “I'd welcome another IBM,” Santagate says, “but prudence requires that we rebuild Claremont with an economically diverse base of smaller businesses, so that the loss of any one company won't harm us the way Joy Manufacturing's demise and the loss of its 1,200 jobs did.”

Relations with the federal government bordered on nonexistent. “We changed this and were able to get \$250,000 in Brownfields grants which helped start the Mill Project,” Pope says. U.S. Sen. John Sununu, R-N.H., now has an office in Claremont, “the first time in living memory that a U.S. senator has had an office in western New Hampshire,” Pope says.

Santagate used his bankers' acumen to repair the city's fiscal health. “It wasn't easy, I had to lay off 21 people in my first year; really tough, but it had to be done.” Since then some of these positions have been refilled. “We have introduced tightly controlled bidding for all our acquisitions, converted to a new computer system and forced a much more realistic assessment of commercial property, which brought in badly needed taxes, and our audits no longer have footnotes speaking to faulty budget practices,” he says.

In September, Claremont drops the curtain on the launch of its transformation through print, radio, television and public events. “There is much more work to be done,” Santagate says, “we are not yet in fat city, and probably never will be, but at least the pieces of the turnaround are in place.” In urban renewal nothing is guaranteed; fiscal transparency and continuing community support are vital ingredients for success, but so far Claremont-rising is an inspiring work in progress.

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***Sarwar A. Kashmeri of Reading, Vt., advises corporations on communications and marketing strategy and is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association. This twice-monthly column explores the Upper Valley's “business climate,” focusing on the issues and conditions affecting the region's economic health. Kashmeri can be reached at [skashmeri@aol.com](mailto:skashmeri@aol.com).***

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