

An 'Affordable Brooklyn,' Easton's Cool Factor Drives Downtown Renaissance

By Nicole Radzievich Mertz

EASTON - Editor's Note: This story is the first of a four-part series exploring investment in the Lehigh Valley's downtowns.

Some consider Easton an affordable Brooklyn.

Just as hip but more accessible, Easton has attracted a burgeoning restaurant scene, popular festivals and a creative class that is transforming the once industrial-driven city in eastern Pennsylvania.

From aged steaks and fine wine to axe throwing and beer, Easton offers eclectic experiences in a downtown prized for its restored brownstones, art deco storefronts and sidewalk cafes near Centre Square. The trendy urban core connects to scenic trails flush with runners and bicyclists navigating art and nature along the confluence of the Delaware and Lehigh Rivers.

"Easton has undergone an incredible urban renaissance, transforming itself into a hip, little Brooklyn along the Delaware River," said Don Cunningham, president CEO of Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation (LVEDC). "It didn't happen by accident. The vision and leadership of Mayor [Sal] Panto and his team working with the private sector and Lafayette College has turned Easton into a shining jewel in the crown of the Lehigh Valley's renaissance."

Investment is chasing those drawn to Easton's lifestyle. Foundations are being poured and steel girders are rising to support 1,600 new apartments in a city of 28,000. Hotel rooms are pitched for buildings near restaurants. There are arts cinemas, a rooftop restaurant and more in the works. The Pulitzer Prize-winning Runner's World magazine and other popular Hearst titles have recently moved their offices into a redeveloped bowling alley.

About half of the \$500 million in economic development projects in the pipeline are proposed in the downtown. This is on top of another \$500 million has come been completed in the last eight years around the city, producing a buzz last year that landed Easton in The New York Times.

"We're an urban environment that's still open for people to shape, so it's very exciting," said Bill Strickland, a Hearst editorial director who works the publishing company's new offices in Easton. "It's easier to recruit employees here than other places...it's like a very affordable Brooklyn. In fact, I call Brooklyn 'the Easton of New York.'"

Easton, Bethlehem and Allentown are among the four Pennsylvania cities that grew by more than 2% between 2010 and 2020, according to the Penn State Data Center. More than 30% of Easton's population is between the ages of 18-34. The Lehigh Valley is among the fastest-growing regions in the state for that demographic.

Migration is driving the growth. Easton, which sits on New Jersey's border, has benefited from its 75-mile proximity to the pricier homes near New York City.

"We're seeing big growth among young adults. They're looking for walkability, convenience, and a vibrant lifestyle," Panto said. "They're getting that in Easton. They love our festivals. They love the living downtown. They can walk home or wherever they want."

The long-time mayor knows that the recent glut of investment caps off decades of hard work and public-private partnerships to revive Easton, a town once enriched by the textile industry and then challenged by suburbanization.

Panto credits the State Theatre Center for the Arts, a nonprofit that brings Broadway shows and concerts downtown, and Lafayette College, which expanded its campus from College Hill into the downtown, as the anchors that continued to draw people to Easton even during the leaner years. The Crayola Experience opened in 1996, branding the city as a kid-friendly destination that now draws 400,000 annually.

Restaurants catering to those visitors followed. Restaurateur Mick Gjevukaj in 2003 opened his first, the River Grille, and has since followed it with Ocean and Three Oak Steakhouse. He has opened The Townley House, a boutique hotel in a 19th century residence. On the marquee corner at Centre Square, he is proposing a seven-story building with 49 hotel rooms, two restaurants and meeting space.

Gjevukaj said he searched New Jersey locales to establish his businesses, but none had as much potential as Easton.

"Easton is something more than those other cities," Gjevukaj said. "The other places didn't have a square or the history Easton has. Easton has the river and is surrounded by mountains."

From the 3rd and Ferry Fish Market to New Orleans-inspired Bayou, more restaurants have since followed, and cemented Easton's reputation as a "foodie" destination. The Easton Public Market an artisanal-driven venue featuring locally sourced food and vendors, opened in 2016 amid a flurry of food-themed festivals. From Garlic Fest to Bacon Fest, popular festivals spread the word of Easton's culinary offerings, giving throngs of visitors a taste of Easton's cool factor.

"Every weekend, there seems to be a different festival," said Michael Schaefer, who recently moved from Jersey City to Easton's College Hill. "You walk outside and see someone playing a lute or riding a unicycle. Where we live right now is just amazing."

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when Easton turned the corner, but Panto points to a dramatic symbol of it: the old Pomeroy building a block away from Centre Square. The hulking concrete building, once flush with well-heeled customers, languished vacant for 35 years. In 2015, the building reopened with first-floor restaurants topped by high-end lofts with hardwood floors, granite countertops and 14-foot ceilings.

Mark Mulligan, whose VM Development Group is behind the transformation, has since taken on many of Easton's hard-to-develop properties, including the Simon Silk Mill. The 19th century mill has been recast into an artistically focused community of 270 apartments, more than 30 businesses that are connected to the downtown via the Karl Stirner Arts Trail.

Mulligan's company is not alone. Peron Development, which took on key projects in nearby Bethlehem, is behind the Seville apartments on what was a tony block dubbed Millionaire's Row, and the Confluence mixed use project at the prominent location at the site of the former Days Inn. City Center Corp., which has transformed downtown Allentown.

"It's the right moment" for Easton, Mulligan said at a recent LVEDC forum. "All the little things that come together to make a really cool place."



What's Next for Downtown Easton?

Half of the \$500 million of the economic development in Easton's pipeline are located in the downtown. Nearly 1,000 residential units have been proposed or are under construction in the downtown.



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