

# The Hartford Courant

## Q&A: 'Front Street' Developer Helen Nitkin

### Finally Gaining Traction, Downtown District Can Start Thinking About Phase 2: Apartments

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8:43 PM EDT, October 7, 2012

The development of downtown Hartford's Front Street has been about as tortured as a mixed-used project can get: a decade of delays, three developers, and a drastic downsizing of the original vision.

But behind the scenes, another kind of drama was unfolding: Bradley Nitkin, the Greenwich real estate developer who took on Front Street in 2005, was diagnosed with cancer a year into the project. When he died in 2009, his wife, Helen Nitkin, who helped co-found their company in 1985, The HB Nitkin Group, took over at the helm of both the company and Front Street, in the teeth of a devastating recession.

Plans for apartments over the commercial space had already been put off and the focus had long shifted from shopping to entertainment and dining.

Some thought Front Street would never be built, and when the exterior shell was completed in 2010, it sat empty for nearly two years.

The buzz around state-subsidized Front Street has been more upbeat in recent weeks: a movie theater will open by early November, Infinity Music Hall is coming next year, and there is

a third lease signed with an as-yet unnamed restaurant.

Helen Nitkin, 64, said those tenants will give the development the traction it needs to sign more tenants and will help propel the phase 2: 115 apartments, mostly studios, one-bedrooms and a few two-bedrooms. A few days ago, Nitkin talked with The Courant about Front Street and plans for its future. Below is a transcript of that conversation, edited for length and clarity.

**Q: What is your overall vision for Front Street, and how has that changed since you came on in 2005?**

A: When we first came in, we thought the first phase would be residential and commercial, and then we went through the entire design process because of the layout of the project wasn't economically feasible. So I think phase one is really what we wanted it to be, which is a restaurant and entertainment complex. And we hope to fill in with other high-quality tenants that will be local, regional and maybe, national. I think we have the critical mass now to attract those types of tenants.

**Q: What additional tenants do you hope to attract?**

A: I would still like to see a mid-priced restaurant come in, see local, successful, entities, restaurants come in. We've talked to one local restaurant. Some of the restaurants come with an entertainment component as well.

**Q: How much space is left to lease?**

A: We have 60 percent leased. There is about 25,000 square feet left to lease.

**Q: Didn't shopping play a stronger role in your original plans?**

A: If we discussed anything, it would have been a Brooks Brothers or something like that. I just don't see that happening in this particular location. The mix isn't right. Fashion retailers like to be near other fashion retailers, and there are other places that do that far more successfully than would be located in downtown Hartford. Some retailers might be attracted, but as far a whole gamut of retailers we haven't seen the interest.

**Q: The next phase is apartments. How are those plans going?**

A: We're out in the market right now looking for financing, once that is secure, and we'd have to work on construction drawings,

I would say probably within a year would start construction on that. It's our goal to do it sooner rather than later. Given the high occupancy rate in downtown Hartford, we'd like to take advantage of that. The residential supports the commercial and the commercial supports the residential.

**Q: The old Hartford Times building is the third phase. How does that fit into the plans?**

A: We're committed to keeping the facade, which is on the historic register. We would probably build commercial on the lower floors and residential above.

**Q: Any idea how many more apartments?**

A: We haven't gotten to that point yet. It will be larger than [phase 2] We haven't delved into that yet.

**Q: This has been a long slog, obviously.**

A: Oh, really? I was waiting for you to get to that point.

**Q: People were doubting. How would you describe how this has unfolded? Was it worth it?**

A: Well, this a long conversation we could have. I think where we are right now, I would say it was worth it and it is worth it. My husband really made a commitment to downtown Hartford and this project. He had a background of always being interested in public service and when this was presented to him, he felt that this was a way of making a commitment not only to our business but to the state that we do business in. He wasn't altruistic. He was a smart businessman. But he felt very good about being part of this process. Sometimes from

outside the community, you can see that there's an opportunity. And I think that's what he saw. As far as the road and the path we've taken to get here, it's not what we initially anticipated. And given the economic climate we've gone through, it has been a very challenging project. We've never lost sight of what our commitment is and our focus, and on a personal level this is a commitment to the legacy that my husband set forth.

**Q: What was different than you expected?**

A: We originally thought it was going to be a much bigger development in the first instance. And the prior developers had created a much bigger project, which if one really dissected it, one would realize it just wasn't economically feasible. We came onto the market [during] one of the most difficult real estate markets in history, in a market that was yet to be tested. And yes, there were many naysayers along the way. I think that one of things to create something new and different, you have to block out the noise. And there was a lot of noise around this project. We worked very hard as a company to stay the course, not to be distracted and to make it happen. And that's what risk-takers do.

**Q: How many potential tenants have kicked the tires?**

A: A fair number.

**Q: Dozens?**

A: I would say so. In 2009 and 2010, it was a project that people had to see was going to be built. It wasn't until after it was built that people took us seriously. It was going to happen. We were still in a very deep recession and a lot of

restaurants weren't expanding, or entertainment venues. We are beginning to see some easing up of business decisions toward opening up new venues. And each deal has taken a long time to happen.

**Q: Was it difficult taking over after your husband passed away?**

A: My husband became involved in 2005 and diagnosed with cancer in 2006 and all during the time he was dealing with it, he stayed focused on this project and did what he had to do. He worked with the state and brought in Peter Christian, who been incredibly important in this project as well and then my husband passed away in 2009. And I had been in the business beforehand and then I stepped into run the business and I had been involved in the original designs on phase one. Was it difficult? I think it was extraordinary difficult. To deal with both my husband's illness, his death and then stepping in taking over the business which was really his passion and to take over this project again, at a time when we were faced with very difficult economic problems throughout the real estate world...this a true testament to my husband and our firm. He was very smart in the way he did business. He was never overly aggressive and because of the way he structured things in terms of always having reserve funds and running a lean operation, we were able to get through this and come out fairly strong and stable on the other side. We are a very stable company.

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