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COVER STORY

Never heard of North Central Troy? Let these people introduce you

Downtown development isn’t enough. These people want to change the way you see this neighborhood — and spread growth beyond the city center.

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After 16 years, Tina Urzan feels she has proven that running a bed and breakfast in north central Troy is not a ludicrous idea.

When Urzan opened Olde Judge Mansion, a bed and breakfast on 8th Avenue, in 1999, a typical reaction she heard was “Are you kidding me, a B&B in north central? Who’s going to stay there?”

“What you used to hear about Troy in north central is extremely different from what it is now,” Urzan said. Urzan, 64, has lived in Troy her entire life and has been heavily involved in the community. About three years ago, she joined the city’s industrial development authority. “There’s been a lot of effort that’s gone into it.”

The sentiment that the area that connects downtown to Lansingburgh, known unofficially as north central Troy, is unsafe and unsavory still exists, but is slowly changing. Private individuals, real estate developers, artists and nonprofits are contributing to the rebirth of yet another section of Troy, which is enjoying a boom in its downtown that has not been fully felt in other areas.

Drive over the Collar City Bridge, away from Green Island, and downtown Troy is to your right, where restaurants, coffee shops, businesses and retail are generating more activity.

In the area between the Green Island Bridge and Collar City Bridge, there are a few restaurants, including Brown’s Brewing Co., and Hedley Park Place, home to city hall and software developer Apprenda. First Columbia, a large real estate developer, has proposed a $60 million project, which includes a hotel, parking garage, apartments and more, near that portion of River Street.

To the left of the Collar City Bridge is north central Troy, a largely residential neighborhood. Old textile mills, where Troy earned its nickname as the Collar City, line the Hudson River. Construction is ongoing to convert old factory buildings, like the former Mooradian’s Furniture building, into apartments.

“People are excited and are invested in seeing these large buildings converted into use,” said Jennica Petrik-Huff, the Capital Region project manager at The Community Builders, the developer behind the $22.2 million Tapestry on the Hudson project at the former Mooradian’s building.
“They’ve been just large, dark, hulking buildings that have probably made it intimidating to drive up from city hall and go into north central Troy. Now, they’re lit up and there’s life in them and it makes for a much more welcoming environment.”

The momentum in the neighborhood, where real estate is less expensive than downtown, is important not only to Troy boosters, but also to those who live, work and have stakes in the success of other downtowns in the Albany region. In Schenectady, redevelopment is moving toward Lower State Street. In Albany, the warehouse district is recognized for its new energy and known for its cluster of restaurants and bars.

The swell of interest has the potential to transform the neighborhood and spread some investments beyond downtown.

“There’s been a lot of work done on the downtown area and it pretty much stopped, the activity had really stopped down by city hall, which is not that far, but makes a huge difference,” said Amy Klein, executive director of the nonprofit Capital Roots. “The Collar City Bridge was a major cutoff in terms of development activity. The prosperity had not eeked over to this side of Troy.”

Capital Roots, a regional organization that works to reduce the impact of poor nutrition on public health, brightened the area when it opened a $2.8 million Urban Grow Center, decorating a crosswalk with large paintings of produce and adding a glittering mural.

Organizations like The Sanctuary for Independent Media and Troy Bike Rescue have long had presences in the area and their mark is felt in murals, gardens and artwork around the neighborhood.

Still, the area’s biggest challenge is the blight and vacancies that remain, said Monica Kurzejeski, Troy’s deputy mayor. New Mayor Patrick Madden has said strengthening Troy’s neighborhoods and spreading the city’s revitalization is a priority.

“That area has all the makings of a really solid neighborhood,” Kurzejeski said. “It’s just a matter of putting all the pieces together now.”

The recently-formed Troy Community Land Bank is focusing its initial efforts on the north central neighborhood.

Jesse Marshall and the team at Margination plans to be another piece of the solution. Margination is dedicated to providing support to business owners from economically depressed neighborhoods. The organization is currently working with two small businesses with the end goal of boosting economic security for business owners and creating jobs for the neighborhood.

In 2014, Klein and Capital Roots celebrated the opening of the Urban Grow Center at 594 River St., the first phase of the organization’s plans for its physical infrastructure in north central Troy. When the center opened, there was zero additional occupancy on the block, Klein said.

Now, Hudson Arthaus, a $19.4 million apartment project, is open and more projects are in the pipeline. Across the street, The Community Builders is converting the former Mooradian’s building into 67 mixed-income apartment units. Further along River Street, assisted living developer PAZ Healthcare purchased the former clothing factory at 701-715 River St.

John Blackburn and Tom Rossi, principals at Troy-based Redburn Development and the internet service provider MassiveMesh, will transform the four-story, former School 1 building into apartments. Redburn Development opened Tilley Lofts, a 62-unit apartment complex inside a former ladder factory in Watervliet and has also converted River Street Lofts in downtown Troy. Like other developers, they began to look around the edges of downtown.

“What we feel really good about in north central is the momentum,” Rossi said. “There’s a lot of projects going on in that neighborhood.”

Part of the success of the neighborhood relies on individuals’ willingness to invest in homes.
That’s where Brian McCandless comes in. McCandless bought his first property to the north of the Collar City Bridge in 2012. He’s well-known around the neighborhood for his residential redevelopment projects.

“I want to draw people to north central Troy and affirm it’s a nice place to live,” said McCandless, who has sublet studio space at the former Kelly Clothes textile factory (now Hudson Arthaus) on River Street for 20 years. A physician by trade, McCandless is also a successful sculptor. He created the ornate oven at the wood-fired pizza restaurant Bacchus.

McCandless is now working on several commercial projects. He’s partnering with architects Michael Phinney and Jonathan Haynes on plans to convert 669 River St. into a mixed-use project. Phinney and Haynes are owners of The Local in Saratoga.

McCandless also owns the former St. Patrick’s Church and The Hangar, which Brian Gilchrist, owner of the Ale House across the street, leases. The Hangar hosts musicians, burlesque shows and private events. Gilchrist’s mission is to give people more reasons to visit north central.

Urzan, owner of Olde Judge Mansion, now has her answer to people who ask what visitor will stay at a bed and breakfast in north central Troy. She sees a number of guests traveling to the city to visit Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Emma Willard School.

Urzan has made a point of getting to know business owners and developers touring the area. She offers an optimistic vision for the neighborhood: A full-fledged grocery, small parks, restaurants and owner-occupied residences.

For now, most people visiting Troy turn right off the Collar City Bridge, toward downtown. Urzan, McCandless and others have been involved in the neighborhood for decades. New stakeholders, including large developers, are matching their enthusiasm for north central.

“The energy they have and what they’re bringing to the neighborhood, you can’t replicate that,” Kurzejeski said.