

# Artist lofts slated for downtown Lynn

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In an attempt to help lure artists downtown, the city of Lynn plans to make its largest public investment in a downtown building to date, pledging to spend \$1.7 million to renovate a five-story structure into residential work lofts for artists.

“Our whole premise is putting people into the downtown, whether it’s residential or businesses,” said James Cowdell, director of Lynn’s Economic Development and Industrial Corporation.

Last week, Cowdell said the corporation had chosen an architect for the year-long rehab, which will transform an old stationery store into eight artist lofts and a 960-square-foot commercial space on the first floor. Cowdell said the artist lofts would range from 400 to 800 square feet and would probably be sold to first-time homebuyers. The city also plans to sell the first-floor office space.

Cowdell said several factors influenced the decision to designate the building for working artists. Over the last year, a committee of residents and downtown business representatives met with Cowdell to work on creating a unified vision for Lynn’s Central Square district.

Once a busy shoe manufacturing hub, the downtown has seen revitalization projects come and go in recent decades. But a 2003 project to allow old factories to be used as residences downtown has served as a foundation for boosting Central Square’s economy. Over the last nine years, 250 condos have been built downtown and, according to Cowdell, all are occupied. All were built in the shadow of the downtown commuter rail station, which can bring a commuter to Boston within 30 minutes.

Infrastructure has been slow to follow the condos because of the recession, say Cowdell and other city officials. Still, some restaurants have sprung up as gathering spots for the downtown condo owners. As for business, two centers for the arts – Lynn Arts and Raw Art Works – have served as downtown business anchors and have drawn the new residents into their galleries. Also within walking distance of the condos are the Lynn Museum and a Civil War museum.

Meanwhile, in March, the state recognized the burgeoning art scene in Central Square, with the Massachusetts Cultural Council designating it as a center for the arts.

The state arts center designation and desire to expand upon the existing art center and galleries led Cowdell’s working group to recommend that the city buy the blighted downtown building and offer it to artists who want to live and work in Lynn.

“It’s been proven over and over again that when the artists come, good things follow,” said Corey Jackson, who was a member of Cowdell’s committee.

Jackson grew up in Peabody, but now lives in a condo in downtown Lynn and believes that the arts will help shape the inner city’s economy.

He writes the [downtownlynn.com](http://downtownlynn.com) blog, and also runs Arts After Hours, which produces stage performances at the Neal Rantoul Black Box Theater at Lynn Arts. Since founding the theater company last June, he has produced over 70 performances in downtown Lynn.

Jackson said a lot of artists and musicians already live in the downtown condos, and are looking to support further arts endeavors.

The newly acquired five-story building sits next to Raw Art Works, which draws about 1,000 grade-school students each year with its free programming. The organization, which offers everything from painting to video instruction, has a first-floor gallery.

Kit Jenkins, executive director of Raw Art Works, said the city’s decision will help expand the arts district and bring more people to the downtown. “I think it is going to be a boon to what we’d like to see artistically, and culturally continue to grow,” said Jenkins.

“We really look forward to seeing who these neighbors will be, because we feel that there could be all sort of possibilities to have a synergistic role here.”

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