NEWS

"I love not man the less, but nature more."
LORD BYRON ENGLISH POET

City leaders imagine more connected Union Station after revamp

BY CRISTINA ORTIZ
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Union Station's massive arched windows and soaring waiting room have greeted generations of travelers arriving in New Haven. Now, more than a century after the current building opened, a transformation is underway.

The initiative Union Station Partnership is pursuing renovations to the building alongside a broader plan of development for the surrounding area. As part of the $24.8 million state-funded refurbishment, Union Station will get renovated restrooms and retail spaces, a new central atrium and exterior repairs.

City officials see the transit hub as an anchor for New Haven's growth, while preservation advocates are asking to save some crucial elements of the station. Shared between both visions is Union Station's role as a gateway to the city.

"It's the front door to New Haven, but it's also, for New Haven, the front door to the world," Christopher Wigren, the deputy director of local nonprofit Preservation Connecticut, said in a video interview.

Union Station's current building opened in 1920 after the previous train hall burned in 1918. Architect Cass Gilbert designed the building for the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad, which wanted its New Haven station to embody the importance of rail travel in the region.

Wigren described the waiting room as "dignified, elegant, but not overwhelming."

The station has not always served as New Haven's front door. It closed in the early 1970s as railroads struggled against growing car and air travel. Passengers continued using the platforms while the main building remained closed. The station was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. It reopened after a major renovation in 1985.

That rehabilitation also added new architectural elements to the station. Elizabeth Holt, the interim director of historic preservation at the New Haven Preservation Trust, pointed to the iconic metal passenger tunnels, whose futuristic design contrasts with Gilbert's Beaux-Arts.

These tunnels are at risk of replacement, a proposal that has drawn opposition from some who want to retain their distinctive design.

"I personally think that the juxtaposition of the design of the tunnels to the original building is what makes it unique," Holt said in a video interview.

Aïcha Woods, a former executive director of New Haven's City Plan Department, said 20th-century urban renewal fundamentally changed the station's relationship with the rest of New Haven. The construction of Route 34 cleared and divided areas between Union Station and Downtown, leaving the station surrounded by transportation infrastructure rather than the dense neighborhood that had once connected it to the city.

"That redevelopment also kind of stranded the train station," Woods said in a phone interview.

More recent planning efforts have tried to mend that separation. The Hill-to-Downtown plan, developed around 2013, envisioned new projects on land shaped by Route 34 and stronger connections between the station and surrounding neighborhoods.

The city's housing authority also plans to build as many as 2,500 new housing units across from the station, Mayor Justin Elicker said in a press conference last week. New Haven recently failed to win a $26 million federal grant to support construction near the station but plans to go ahead with its first phase. Elicker has frequently touted transit-oriented development in the city.

"We see Union Station as a real anchor to both our economic future and the quality of life here in the city," Michael Piscitelli, the city's economic development administrator, said in a video interview.

Development around the station could allow more people to live near the rail while strengthening New Haven's position as a regional employment center, Piscitelli added. For him, that means thinking beyond simply adding more places for commuters to park.

"We'll never be highly competitive economically if we are overly dependent on cars or the highway system," Piscitelli said.

That debate predates the current redevelopment. In 2015, the New Haven Urban Design League argued that weak local transit made it difficult for people arriving at Union Station to travel the "last 1/2 mile" to other parts of New Haven. The group argued that limited transit connections increased demand for parking around the station, according to notes from its president, Anstress Farwell.

The latest redevelopment efforts also raise questions about the station's interior.



XIMENA SOLORZANO / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

The latest renovations to Union Station have local leaders discussing its changing role. The plans arrive after decades of efforts following urban renewal to better connect the station to the rest of the city.

Piscitelli said commercial activity should still be focused on commuters.

"First and foremost, we have to serve the passenger and the traveling public," Piscitelli said.

Preservation advocates agree on that priority, but some question whether the proposed interior redesign accomplishes it. Farwell wrote in an email that she thought businesses could set up shop on the balconies or lower level but argued that "having retail/hospitality complicate the necessary functions of the waiting hall defaults on its purpose."

Farwell pointed to Grand Central Terminal as an example of a historic station where commercial activity exists without taking over the central waiting space.

Wigren made a similar argument. "What Union Station is about is transportation," Wigren said. "It's a place for coming and going, and that, I think, needs to be the focus of it."

But Woods said the future of Union Station will depend just as much on what happens around the building. More housing and activity near the station could help better connect an area shaped for decades by highways and parking with the rest of New Haven.

"Just having a kind of 24-hour presence and vibe and activity around the station would be amazing," Woods said.

New Haven, the city's Parking Authority and the Connecticut Department of Transportation are collaborating on the redevelopment.

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Three Democrats to face off in special election for Ward 24 alder

BY NELLIE KENNEY
STAFF REPORTER

Three Democrats will compete to represent part of Edgewood in the city's third special alder election of the year, which is slated for Nov. 10.

Members of Ward 24's Democratic ward committee voted to back candidate Randall Furlow, who is currently a co-chair of the ward committee, at a Sunday meeting. Lindsey Tengatenga, the director of a Connecticut nonprofit, and Jennifer Tillman, a realtor and social worker, are also running as petitioning candidates. The race will choose a replacement for Ward 24 Alder Evette Hamilton, who stepped down at the end of September.

In a speech at the beginning of Sunday's meeting, Hamilton described the role of alder as "stewardship for our people in our community" and said she hopes an incoming representative will focus on housing, education and safe streets.

Hamilton, who had represented Ward 24 since 2011, was the third alder this year to resign before serving out her full term. Former Ward 7 Alder Eli Sabin '22 LAW '26 resigned in January, shortly before he was set to be sworn in. A new alder, Christine Kim '99, was sworn in in March. Former Ward 9 Alder Caroline Tanbee Smith '14 SOM '25 stepped down in August. That seat was filled by Democratic Socialist Maria-Threese Serana last month.

On Sunday, the three petitioning candidates gave speeches before ward committee members cast votes on their endorsement.

Furlow, who is the cousin of Board of Alders Majority Leader Richard Furlow, opened his remarks by describing the deaths of his mother, aunt and two cousins, as well as a number of close friends, all of which he said occurred in the last several years. Following those losses, Furlow said he "began thinking about what living should look like."

The example that his family members had set through their community involvement, including his aunt's role as a Ward 6 Democratic co-chair, he said, inspired him to "take responsibility for the present."

In conversations with ward residents, Furlow said that he has heard a slew of hyperlocal concerns, including issues with unsafe driving, sidewalks and trash and recycling.

"These are not the issues that will make national headlines, but they are the issues that affect the quality of life of the people that we are called to represent," Furlow said. He promised to "answer calls, return messages, follow up on concerns and communicate with city departments" on behalf of the ward if elected as alder.

Tillman, who spoke second, said that she decided to run because she has heard "many of the same concerns" repeatedly when talking to residents of the ward.

People are concerned about "crime, speeding, trash pickup, vacancy and the need for stronger police presence," she said. In sum, she added, "people want to feel safe in their neighborhood."

Tillman suggested that her professional experience would be a boon for her as an alder.

"As a realtor, I understand the need for affordable housing," she said. "As a social worker, I understand many of the social problems that affect families."

Tengatenga, who will appear as Lindsey Eichler on the ballot, described the ward as a "community where people care about one another" and "differences are welcomed."

She said that she was guided to public service by the example of her father, a Vietnam War veteran, and her mother, who worked in public education.

Her priorities as alder, she said, would be "affordable access to healthy food, stronger civic participation, safer streets and sidewalks, support for immigrant families, youth empowerment and economic opportunity."

Only eight of the 29 people last filed as members of the Ward 24 ward committee were present at Sunday's meeting. Of those, six voted to support Furlow. One voted for Tengatenga and one abstained from the vote. Furlow himself was one of the voters.

In an interview after the meeting, Furlow said that he had "confidence in the Democratic process," which was displayed at the meeting. His campaign will strive to unify the ward and will see "a lot of people on the doors every day" talking to voters, he said.

Ward Committee Co-Chair Mareika Phillips, who ran the meeting, said in an interview that the committee had "done what we could reasonably" to get members together. The Connecticut Secretary of State's Office released details about the election's timeline last week and party endorsements were due Monday, leaving a short window for scheduling the meeting, Phillips said.

Phillips also noted that the most recent member list is from the 2024-25 year and several of the members listed no longer live in the ward.

In a text message to the News, Tillman wrote that she respects "the outcome" of Sunday's vote but sees it as "an opportunity to become more visible and even more connected to the community."

Tengatenga wrote in a text message that following the meeting she feels "even more excited to create opportunities and pathways to engagement for residents ready to fight for greater investment and quality of life in our ward" and described her campaign as "a love letter" to the neighborhood.

Election day is set for Nov. 10, only a week after the polls close for state-level elections. Shannell Evans, New Haven's Democratic registrar of voters, said at the meeting that there will not be overlap between the times when the polls are open for the two elections.

No Republican or Independent candidates have filed to run in the race.

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