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Development catalysts can be big or small, GrowSmart winners prove



COURTESY / LACHMAN ARCHITECTS AND PLANNERS

The new building at 502 Stevens Ave. in Portland's Deering Center neighborhood was designed to fit in with the neighborhood, but also to add cohesion. It has been named an Outstanding Project by GrowSmart Maine.

BY MAUREEN MILLIKEN

Two building projects — one high-profile and one a small neighborhood project with a big reach — are among six inaugural GrowSmart Award winners.

The awards recognize growth the helps communities while maintaining historic and natural assets, GrowSmart Maine said.

The two Outstanding Project winners, while poles apart in size and function, are both acting as catalysts for their urban community.

502 Deering Center, at 502 Stevens Ave. in Portland, is a three-story 9,643-square-foot mixed-use building in tightly packed historic area of the city.

The Bill and Joan Alford Main Street Commons at 151 Main St., Waterville, Colby College's 102,000-square-foot retail and residential building, is part of the college's \$50 million investment in revitalizing downtown.

Nancy Smith, executive director of GrowSmart Maine, said the awards were launched this year to draw attention to smart growth.

"We wanted to show how smart growth is flourishing throughout Maine, as well as illustrate what smart growth looks like," she said. The six winners — a combination of building projects, policies and downtown plans — emulate smart growth principles, she said.

Those principles include helping communities welcome growth in established areas, while maintaining historic and natural assets, encouraging mixed use, diverse housing and transportation options, and community engagement.

"Smart growth has reached a pivotal moment in Maine," Smith said. "The combination of an aging population, growth of downtown revitalizations, changing climate, and growing energy awareness has created market forces that make the core values of smart growth attractive to a wider variety of people."

A Deering Center catalyst



PHOTO / MAUREEN MILLIKEN

502 Deering Center on Stevens Avenue in Portland, was named an Outstanding Project by GrowSmart Maine.

502 Deering Center, designed and owned by architects Denis Lachman and Kiya Smith, of Portland, includes three commercial spaces, six apartments and a pocket park. It was built last year and [opened this spring](#).

It's at 502 Stevens Ave., in the heart of the city's active and diverse Deering Center neighborhood, on less than a quarter of an acre. The design made a lot of use of a small lot, while also setting ambitious goals for use and impact on the neighborhood. It was completed in the spring.

"[It] demonstrates that it is possible, on a limited budget, to successfully reintroduce the historic form of a four-story mixed-use building on a compact lot," GrowSmart said in naming it a winner. "This concept has proven practical, flexible and attractive for more than a century and a half."

The ground floor storefront retail spaces are occupied by the second location of Yarmouth's Ice It! Bakery and Darby Jones, a fashion accessories store. The building also includes a ground-floor live/work yoga studio and six apartments on two upper floors.

A public pocket park is also part of the site, a "pause and meet" area with benches, a bike rack, drought-resistant native plants and pervious pavers, which also provides open space between the building and Roy's Shoe Shop next door. There is also onsite parking in the back.

The building is part of the "tried and true" signature form of downtowns and village centers, Lachman and Smith said in their submission to the contest.

Dense, three- and four-story mixed-use buildings on compact lots "is the fabric we know and love, and others admire — because it has proven practical, flexible and attractive for a century and a half," they said.

"However, over the past half century, land use zoning, economics, banking and building codes have unintentionally conspired to disincentivize this building type" they said. "We believe that new fabric buildings are a critical piece of our growth solution puzzle." But the lack of incentives has resulted in a lack of new mixed-use compact-lot infill projects.

The small and restricted lots create "many steep design and financial challenges."

"Their surrounding neighbors are close, so expectations are high for projects to fit well into their context," the designers said. "Limited sites under perform for large developers, so it is smaller developers who must overcome their many challenges."

Small project, big goals

The project was designed to complement the neighborhood and buildings around it and use the small space as efficiently as possible.



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The public pocket park at 502 Deering Center is intended as a "pause and meet" spot in the neighborhood.

said.

But the small project also had some big goals, including to catalyze traditional residential/retail renovation and development that fits with the neighborhood, helps strengthen the community fabric while also providing needed housing.

Some of the specific goals laid out by the designers were to:

- Demonstrate that it's possible, on a limited budget, to successfully re-introduce Maine's downtown mixed-use fabric;
- Demonstrate that new downtown fabric can/should be done according to Smart Growth principles;
- Provide a real-life example that this type of project "continues to be as practical, flexible and attractive as ever";
- Show that new mixed-use infill can gracefully complement existing downtown architecture;
- Demonstrate to neighborhoods "that the process for new development can be respectful and result in win-win-win for the neighborhood, developer and municipality";
- Pave the way for similar mixed-use compact-infill projects as working example for developers, lenders, regulatory agencies and commercial and residential tenants.

502 Deering Center is also in one of the city's most energetic off-peninsula neighborhoods.

Deering started out as a separate municipality before it joined Portland, and still retains an autonomous vibe. Historically, it's been a thriving neighborhood, home to Deering High School, the Portland campus of the University of New England (on the former Westbrook College campus), and a variety of small shops and restaurants.

The Baxter Woods park, with walking trails and woods, is at the center of the neighborhood.

Recent additions to the neighborhood include renovation of the former St. Joseph Convent Motherhouse into 88 units of senior housing. The second location of South Portland's popular Elsmere BBQ & Wood Grill opened at 476 Stevens Ave. over the summer.

"Deering Center already is, and has been for generations, a classic mixed-use and mixed-income neighborhood that brings together housing, businesses, shops, cultural venues, greenspace and pocket parks," Lachman and Smith wrote. "Creating settings where residents can walk to shop, work, play, rest, engage and visit."

Carroll Associates, of Portland, was landscape architect and site permitting firm; Pinkham & Greer, of Portland, was the civil engineer; L&L Structural, South Portland, was structural engineer; Bennett Engineering, of Freeport, did the electrical and plumbing engineer; Ducas Construction, Scarborough, was construction manager.

Bernstein Shur, Portland, was legal counsel and financing was by Gorham Savings Bank.