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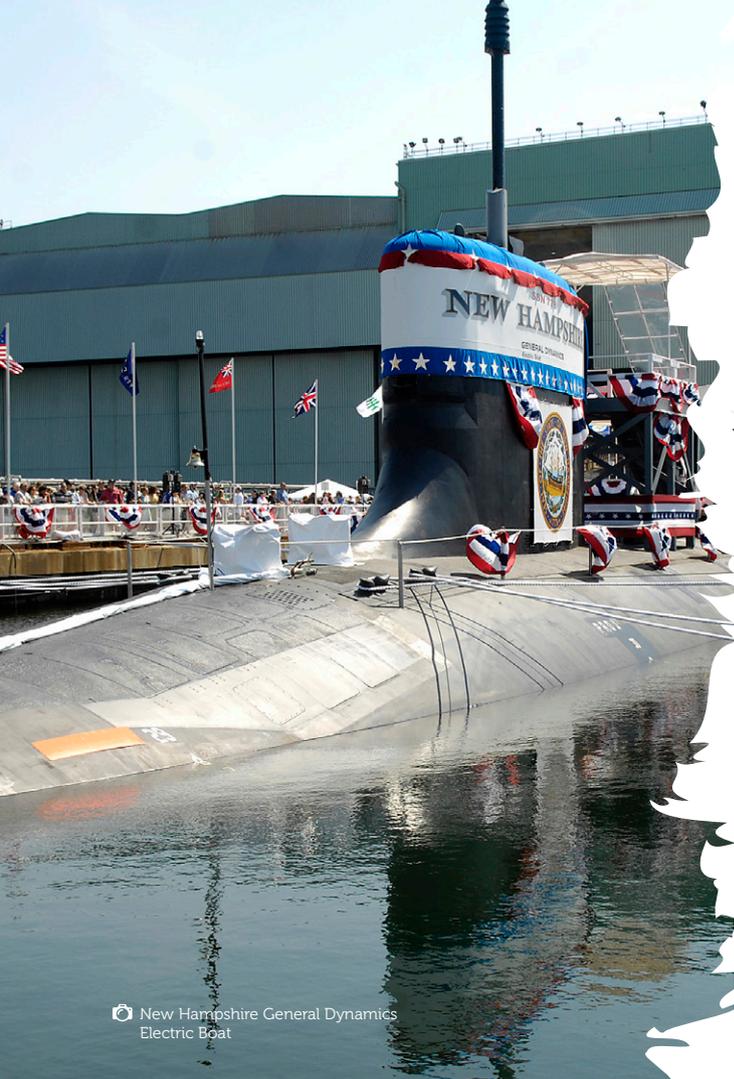
*If you want to see a strong example of a town moving in the right direction, look no further than Groton, Connecticut. The region, which includes the historic village of Mystic, is expanding into other areas of growth in an attempt to become recession-proof. We spoke with Groton's Economic Development Specialist, Sam Eisenbeiser and Manager of Economic and Community Development, Paige Bronk as well as Greater Mystic Chamber of Commerce Chairman of the Board, Al Valente.*

**Written by Mark Golombek**

**G**roton's airport development zone was approved in 2017 and has become a catalyst for small to medium sized business growth. Case in point, the airport industrial zone adjacent to the property has seen interest from fitness companies, Mystic Cheese, a new brewery, an equipment rental firm and the undersea technology company ThayerMahan Inc. Survival Systems is another very successful company in the airport area.

"We were recently visited by the Connecticut Airport Authority, and they talked about initiating limited commercial service at our airport. That's primarily turboprop regional service to nearby hubs like Washington, DC," says Paige.

The airport authority also hinted at the possibility of a new hotel and restaurant on that property. The Mystic Jet Center is looking at a proposed new box hangar at the airport to address demand. According to the authority, the airport has an annual economic impact to the region of \$108 million. This includes the impact on Pfizer, General Dynamics, Electric Boat and the two casinos of Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods Resort. ▶▶



New Hampshire General Dynamics  
Electric Boat



USS Nautilus Museum

▶ Innovative technology is a huge component of business here. Al spoke about CURE Commons and its role in the growth of the area. “It is on the Pfizer campus, and its mission is in incubating fresh ideas and technology. It is focused on bio-science incubation and has space for start-up companies.”

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board (EWIB) collaborated with the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance (EAMA) to train the workforce for jobs in manufacturing. The two worked closely with General Dynamics Electric Boat to tailor a program that certifies students.

“Nearly five hundred students have completed the program since it began, and the job placement rate is at ninety percent. In fact, they are working right now at building capacity in the program, so it can help meet the needs of Electric Boat and other local manufacturers,” says Sam.

The state is replacing technical high school Ella T. Grasso Technical High School with a new facility that will cost \$135 million. It is slated for completion in 2019 and will be specifically equipped for expanding the training and education of manufacturing students.

At a recent legislative function, the executives from Electric Boat spoke about expected growth. The company hired 1,800 employees this year for the Groton site and a further 1,200 employees for its location in Rhode Island. The company received over 80,000 applications.

“Not only are they doing what it takes to get the training in there, but they have a real strong demand for these positions and a lot of great candidates,” says Sam.

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**“We have become an epicenter for undersea and marine-based technology.”**

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There is a current emphasis on the Virginia-class attack submarine, but between 2021 and 2030, there will be preparations to get the new Columbia class submarine into production.

“This sub is about one and a half times the size of the existing Virginia class. They will produce about two subs per year from 2021 forward, which is an unprecedented rate. Nothing like this has been seen since World War II,” says Paige.

There is a tremendous need for suppliers that will support that growth. Groton is looking at several ideas to diversify the

economy, one of which is through Connecticut's public-private economic development program: Innovation Places. The Groton/New London area was selected by the state as one of four innovation communities, and the organization received nearly \$1 million for the first year, with a high likelihood of additional funding in subsequent years.

The local Innovation Places project is called Thames River Innovation Place, and one of its key projects is the Connecticut Undersea Supply Chain Consortium. The goal is to create a supply-chain support network that will consist of fifty to one hundred companies in the long term.

"We have become an epicenter for undersea and marine-based technology. One angle on that Undersea Supply Chain Consortium is that it leverages the growth of Electric Boat, as well as partners with them for increasing our R&D capacity. But also, to reference ThayerMahan, we are going to advance technologically to include unmanned underwater vehicles," says Sam. This is a way for Groton to diversify beyond submarines in a way that is already supported locally.

Groton must diversify to survive. It has the necessary assets of a highly intelligent workforce and accessibility to airport and rail. ▶▶



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## "Groton is looking at several ideas to diversify the economy."

► The town is seeing the largest economic growth in small and medium-sized companies but not necessarily within one industry sector. These companies range from tourism to technology, transportation services, retail and restaurants. This is beneficial, as Groton never has all its eggs in one basket. "We think the blend is actually a good chemistry that would work well with the future mixed-use developments," says Paige.

The town is working to develop a sense of place. Eighty percent of jobs in Groton are held by commuters from the region. There is a need to increase contemporary housing options for millennials entering the workforce and for an aging population looking to downsize. Groton is promoting the development of mixed-use villages via tax increment financing (TIF).

There are two main contributors to the future, as AI sees it. One is the different lifestyle of the millennial generation, and the other is an aging population. Both want to live, work, play and shop in a close-knit area, and get that urban feel, without the congestion. This leads to a technological shift where people are not buying two cars per family and leads to villages that are walkable.

Some of Groton's commercial districts need an overhaul, and it is working with developers to build mixed-use villages. The villages will have contemporary housing, retail that is scaled to the changing retail environment, cuisine and entertainment options and transit to local employers.

"We are ramping up and trying to capture more of these employees and future hires, so they can live here and add more value

to future shopping, dining and entertainment that we would like to propose," says Paige.

One of the keys to retaining people and our workforce is making them a part of the community, which is part of the placemaking policy Groton is employing. It provides a different angle on diversification but is crucial to help make Groton successful. Paige sees this as a significant economic driver.

Mystic is a part of Groton and is growing rapidly. The village is a thriving example of mixed-use and small-scale development. "This is another sector where we see tremendous opportunity, and having two of the biggest casinos in the nation feeds into that as well," says Al.

On both shores of the Thames River lies the Thames River Heritage Park, a large tourist attraction for Groton. A water taxi connects the two shorelines, and a new dock is being built at the Submarine Force Museum, home of the Nautilus submarine. Funding is being raised now for the Coast Guard museum, which will be built on the Thames River.

Tourism attracts more attractions. Al predicts that in another fifteen years, there will be another large thematic point of ►►



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► interest that will keep the Mystic area growing. After bringing in more tourists, the next question is: where to put them?

“We have a little bit of a parking problem now, so, at some point, we plan on developing an underground parking garage or mini-transit systems to bring people in. I see this as part of Mystic’s future, but it would have to be consistent with the aesthetic integrity of the area,” says Al.

Mystic has been a popular spot for over one hundred years, mostly due to its shipbuilding, seaport, historical drawbridge and old Mystic Village tourist attractions. The Mystic Aquarium was built in 1972.

The State of Connecticut is in a dire fiscal state presently. This makes working with economic development a challenge, as there is scant funding to promote tourism. All the growth for Mystic has to be found locally and it does not have a big promotional budget.

“Organically, all of the business owners and local government are working together to keep Mystic a beautiful place to visit. It’s gone through a mini-renaissance over the last two years,” says Al.

Three years ago, Mystic had a few empty storefronts, due to a shift in buying patterns. People are buying more on the internet, so any store with commodities that are found on the internet will not survive. Newer retailers with different products and a greater emphasis on experiences are needed.

In addition, downtown Mystic is shifting away from retail and more toward restaurants. “You can’t buy a restaurant experience on Amazon. It has to be a physical experience which keeps people moving in,” says Al. Mystic has now become a foodie paradise. This has led to a downtown occupancy rate of one hundred percent.

The optimism in the area has called for the revival of an old building named Central Hall that burned down in 2000. It is





being rebuilt as a mixed-use property, with six storefronts on the first floor and the top three floors as condominiums.

A few years ago, Groton recognized the need for increased placemaking and attracting people to the area and looked to raise its profile. Over the course of a few years and in cooperation with local business organizations, a brand identity was developed from scratch.

“The logo is on the website, and the tagline is ‘Explore More.’ This is a full branding identity for us, which led to printed promotional materials and a standalone website that specifically targets a strategy of promoting the quality of place,” says Sam.

In the long term, it is designed to attract and retain the workforce. It creates a communication tool that had been lacking before and creates a lasting impression. Any time that Groton reaches out to businesses looking to relocate or newcomers to the area, they will see what the town is all about. ■



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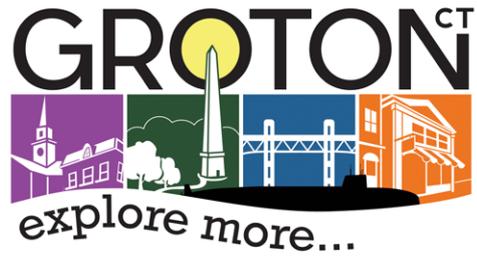
\* Map does not show complete sales territories.



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