



Ash likes what he sees in North Andover's push for development

By Paul Tennant
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NORTH ANDOVER — When Jay Ash, the state's secretary of housing and economic development, visited North Andover on Friday afternoon, he saw a town that's on the move.

"I see the vision," he said.

Ash began his visit at Elite Manufacturing Services Inc. at 400 Willow St., where a highly sophisticated and expensive machine can produce as many as 18,000 circuit boards in an hour. The company, which only recently moved to North Andover from Newburyport, now employs about 20 workers.

Entrepreneurs Liam Holt and Richard Flynn said they're confident they'll be hiring more workers as more companies become aware of what the company's products and reputation. The circuit boards they make are used for LED lighting among other uses.

Holt said they can also make them for transponders.

"We are passionate about what we do," he said.

From Elite Manufacturing, Ash and other state and local officials accompanying him headed for the West and East mills on High Street, where RCG has converted the former Davis & Furber Machine Co. into offices, research and development space, restaurants and apartments.

Ash, who served as city manager of Chelsea for 14 years before Gov. Charlie Baker appointed him to the post in January 2015, said the renovated mills give the area a "quaint village" appearance.

The Baker administration, he said, encourages rehabilitation of old mill buildings rather than just bulldozing them down to make way for modern structures.

The East Mill, on one side of High Street, is 95 percent occupied, according to Alex Steinbergh, one of the principals of RCG. The East Mill houses Jaime's Restaurant and the Good Day Cafe besides offices and apartments.

The West Mill, on the other side of the street, took a hit recently when Schneider Electric moved to Andover and Converse, the sneaker company, transferred its corporate headquarters to Boston.

Another tenant, L-Com, a computer hardware company, will move into the third floor of the West Mill by the end of the month.

“This is awesome,” Ash said as he watched carpenters and other tradespeople getting the quarters ready for L-Com.

A third of the West Mill is now occupied, Steinbergh said. RCG is working to attract tenants who will use the fourth and fifth floors for offices, he said.

The West Mill also has apartments.

Ash said grants and loans provide a “direct” assist to help up-and-coming manufacturing companies, such as Elite, as well as developers such as RCG that are committed to rehabilitating old mill buildings.

Guiding entrepreneurs and investors through the permitting process is another way to promote economic development, he said. Eric Kfoury, North Andover’s community development director, said his department helps companies navigate this challenge at the local level.

“We’ll walk you through the permitting process,” he said.

Ash, who presided over the economic transformation of Chelsea from corrupt, decaying, poverty-stricken city to a place that features thriving restaurants and attractive homes, said part of his job is “cross-pollenization,” which brings

. ideas and concepts from one community to another.

State Rep. James Lyons, R-Andover, whose district includes three precincts in North Andover, accompanied the tour. The Baker administration, he said, is “engaged in local communities” and “business-friendly.”

“We need people in government who understand the importance of the private sector,” he said.

State Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr, R-Gloucester, who represents half of North Andover, pointed out that RCG’s rehabilitation of the Davis & Furber mill buildings has been aided by historic tax credits.

Davis & Furber made looms and spinning equipment for the textile industry from 1932 until 1982.

Investment and research and development tax credits are also “tools” that can help entrepreneurs, Tarr said.

Elite’s Holt and Flynn said the state government buys many products from out-of-state companies. Massachusetts could help its small businesses by purchasing more products from them, they said.

Tarr, who was among those who toured Elite Manufacturing Services, said he wants to push the state to purchase more goods and services from Massachusetts firms.