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ESPN's hometown looks to redevelop downtown

The City of Bristol, Connecticut, home to sports broadcaster ESPN, is teaming up with Renaissance Downtowns of Plainview, New York, to redevelop Bristol's central business district. The municipality, about 20 miles southwest of Hartford, wants to create a walkable, mixed-use neighborhood with a substantial volume of housing. Redevelopment would focus on the 17-acre site of the demolished Bristol Centre Mall.

The mall came into being in 1969-70 as part of an urban renewal effort that wiped out much of the traditional grid of streets and buildings in the 61,000-population city's downtown, according to information posted at Deadmalls.com. If Renaissance Downtowns is successful, Bristol will boast a lively downtown capable of attracting a broad mix of people, including employees of the city's two largest enterprises — ESPN, which has 3,500 employees, and Bristol Hospital, which has over 1,100 employees.

Remnants of the Bristol's old Main Street remain, and could help reestablish a sense of place, Ryan Porter, director of planning and development for Renaissance, told *New Urban News*. The company received a master developer agreement May 25 and will join the Bristol Downtown Development Corporation, the City, and stakeholders in a nine-month to two-year planning process to decide exactly what to build where.

The company made a splash at CNU's 2009 congress in Denver when President Donald Monti announced Renaissance's intent to work with new urbanist planners, architects, and consultants on projects in many third- and fourth-tier cities — those with populations of 30,000 to 150,000 (see July 2009 *New Urban News*). The goal was to get planning under way during the economic slump, so that construction could start when the market begins to revive.

Besides Bristol, Renaissance is currently working with three other municipalities in the Northeast on mixed-use developments — in Glen Cove, Long Island; Nashua, New Hampshire; and downtown Waterbury, Connecticut. Renaissance opened discussions with officials of Meriden, Connecticut, last year, but “nothing concrete” has resulted there, said Brandon Palanker, the company's director of community affairs. ♦