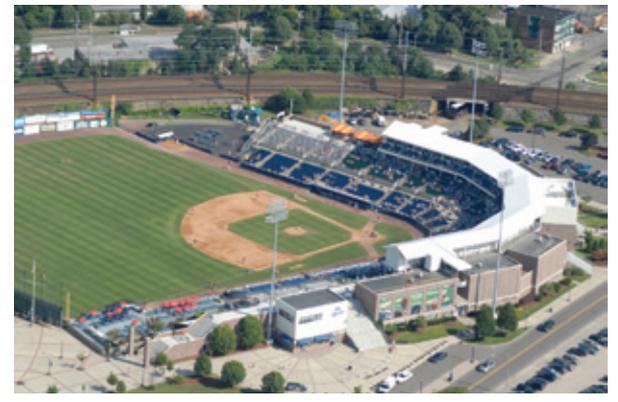




The ferry departing from Bridgeport Harbor



Bridgeport Bluefish Baseball Stadium at Harbor Yard

A Vision for the 21st Century

An Interview with The Honorable Bill Finch, Mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut

EDITORS' NOTE A graduate of the University of Connecticut, Mayor Bill Finch was elected to a four-year term in 2007, after serving seven years as a state Senator in the Connecticut Legislature, where he was Chairman of the Environment Committee. Prior to this, he served as a City Councilman for nine years. As Mayor of Bridgeport (www.bridgeportct.gov), he is a member of The United States Conference of Mayors, serving on its Advisory and Nominating Committees as well as its Climate Protection Task Force. He is also a member of Mayors Against Illegal Guns.



The Hon. Bill Finch

Like many historic manufacturing cities in New England, Bridgeport has had to reinvent itself. What is your vision for Bridgeport?

Bridgeport has an abundance of good housing stock, beautiful parks and public land, a 20-mile waterfront, in addition to two rivers coursing through the city. As we move into the 21st century, I see Bridgeport becoming a mecca for the new urbanists – people, young and old, who want to live in a thriving urban center, relying on mass transportation to take them back and forth to work. The Bridgeport of the future is a city with a vibrant downtown and a thriving entertainment/shopping/dining experience married with cultural offerings, all within easy travel distances of a transportation hub. The American Institute of Architects recently assembled a team of experts to help us assess our sustainable design efforts and these same assets led them to label the Park City a “city of opportunity... poised to reinvent itself for the 21st century.”

In the past three years, downtown has experienced the beginning of a renaissance – a dozen new restaurants have opened in the past 18 months, giving birth to a mini restaurant row, and retail shops are sprouting up on main thoroughfares and in the recently renovated Arcade, a turn-of-the-century indoor shopping area that had lain dormant for many years until a developer restored it to its former beauty. The recent completion of an 84-unit apartment building on Fairfield Avenue, one of downtown’s main arteries, is the first new construction here in more than 25 years. When fully occupied, this will mean nearly 1,100 residents will call downtown home, with more to come.

Tell us about Bridgeport’s illustrious past.

Bridgeport has always been home to industrious, talented, and hardworking people who

have made a name and a reputation for their work that spreads far beyond the city’s boundaries.

Bridgeport was chartered in 1836, more than a hundred years after nearby Stratford and Fairfield were founded. By the late 19th century, it became a manufacturing center producing such goods as the Bridgeport milling machine, carriages, sewing machines, and helicopters and, during World War II, the city became known as the “Arsenal of the Free World” by producing guns and ammunition for the war effort. P.T.

Barnum lived in Bridgeport and is perhaps the city’s most famous Mayor, serving one term. His philanthropic and economic development efforts led to the creation of the local water company and Bridgeport Hospital.

In March 1860, Abraham Lincoln spoke to a standing ovation at Washington Hall, in what is now McLevy Hall. Numerous presidential candidates have visited the city, including Kennedy, Clinton, and Obama. Civil rights activist Martin Luther King gave three speeches at The Klein Memorial Auditorium in the 1960s.

The city was home to the Frisbie Pie Company, which gave rise to the notion that the “Frisbee” was invented in the Park City. The first Subway shop was opened in the city in the mid-1960s.

Among its many assets, the city has benefited from being a transportation hub. Can you explain this?

Bridgeport’s early years before incorporation were marked by a reliance on fishing and farming. The city’s growth accelerated after the opening of a railroad station in 1840. In addition to the Amtrak and Metro-North rail lines, the city lies at the intersection of two major highways – Routes 95 and 8. A state-of-the-art intermodal transportation center in the city’s downtown serves as a hub for rail lines, local and regional bus lines, and the Bridgeport & Port Jefferson Steamboat Company, which connects the city to Long Island via boat several times a day. New York City is just 75 minutes away by train, and the city’s location between New York and Boston, with easy access to Western Massachusetts and Vermont makes it ideal for retirees who want to live the urban lifestyle or young singles who are looking for a more affordable place to live with easy access to transportation to commute to jobs in lower Fairfield County, New Haven, or New York City.

What are some of the assets that Bridgeport has to offer companies considering relocation?

We have a vibrant and diverse community that represents nearly every culture of the world from Caribbean to South American, from Eastern European to African-American – nearly 50 languages can be heard in our city’s schools. Our workforce is hardworking and well-trained. Our location gives businesses that choose to move here access to the tremendous purchasing power and intellectual capacity that is available in Fairfield County and the New York region, married with a lower cost of doing business. Our city’s access to transportation and its unique housing and commercial building stock make it a natural place for companies seeking to relocate. The city is a magnet for artists and the creative class as well as entrepreneurial types who have created businesses not usually found in typical suburban corporate parks.

The city’s green initiative – BGreen 2020 – has received a lot of attention. Would you explain what you have done?

President Obama told mayors from around the country that cities are not the problem – they are the solution to many of the country’s problems. Cities, large and small, are becoming the focal point for energy efficiency and green initiatives. Since issuing an executive order related to sustainability in late 2008, my administration, working in a public/private partnership with the area Business Council and the Regional Plan Association, has plotted a “greenprint” for the city. In addition to reducing carbon emissions and our reliance on fossil fuels, in summer 2009, we created the Mayor’s Conservation Corps, a cadre of young adults who canvassed thousands of city residents to raise awareness about recycling, energy conservation, and storm water management. Their efforts have helped us double our recycling rates in just 18 months.

Together with The WorkPlace, we secured nearly \$4 million in federal grants to institute a green jobs training incubator – the first class is seated and will graduate in a few months, and will go on to take jobs in the green sector. We have a multitude of projects that will be coming on line in future years, which will create efficiencies and allow the city to become a model of sustainable development and economic growth.

Our mantra is “green is green” – going green saves the environment and ultimately will save municipalities money as we work to turn the economy around, and continue the sustainable development that is underway in the Park City. ●