

# Portland Press Herald

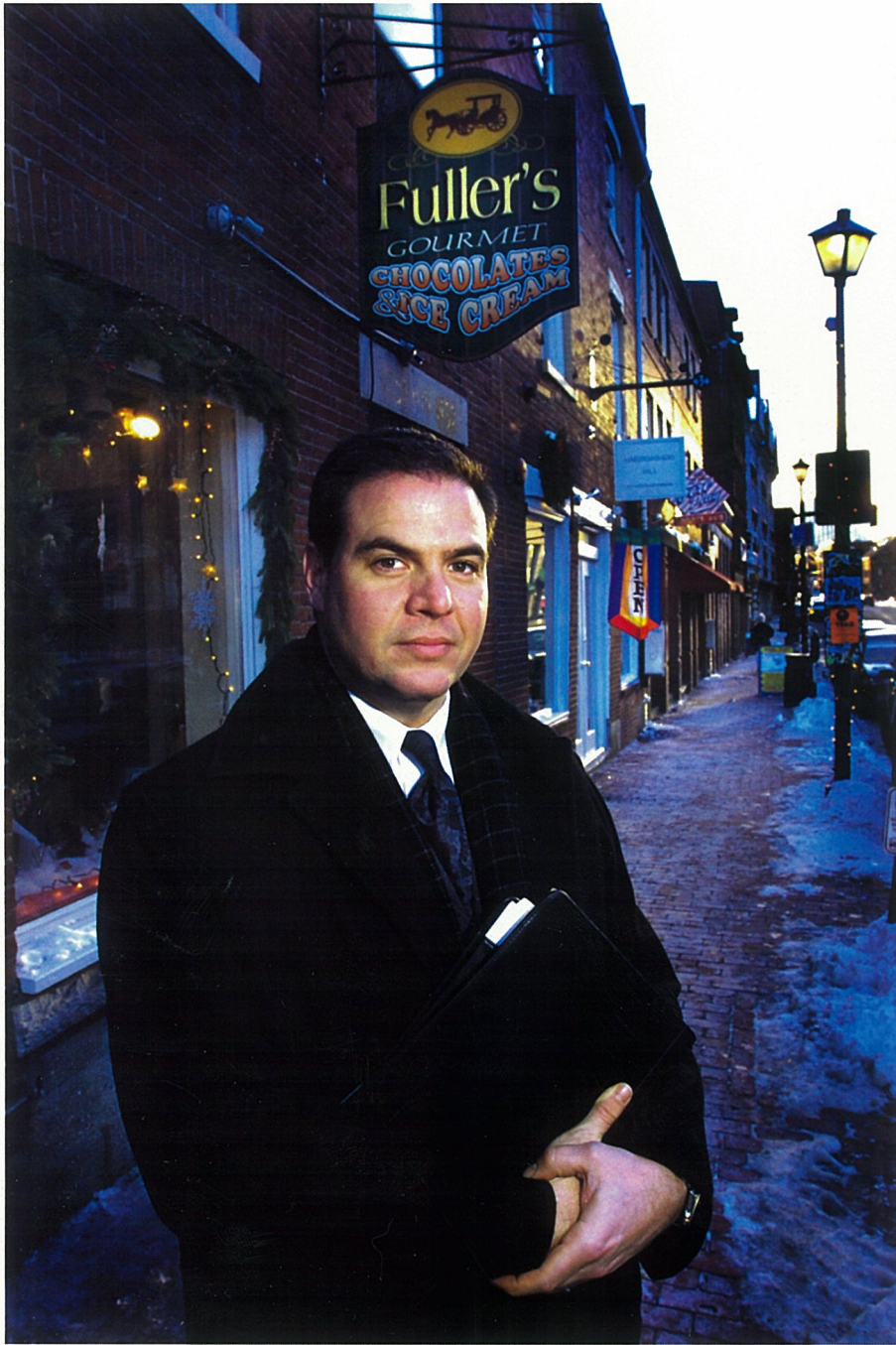
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## INVESTING IN THE FUTURE Family working toward new vision for Old Port

The Baumanns hope to attract diverse tenants to their buildings on Wharf and Fore streets.

By TUX TURKEL Staff Writer



Staff photo by John Ewing  
Steve Baumann in front of a block of buildings his family owns on Fore Street in Portland's Old Port. "We have a long-term vision for these properties," he said.

Heat and running water come in handy when you're starting a business. Both were lacking at 432 Fore St. in Portland when Susan Fuller arrived in town to open Fuller's Gourmet Chocolates and Ice Cream in April 2002.

Shoddy maintenance was just one hurdle faced by Fuller. Her building is in a block bounded by Union, Dana and Wharf streets, a corner of the Old Port that was better known for beer and bar fights than handmade treats.

Maintenance is no longer an issue at 432 Fore St. And the concentration of rowdy nightspots that has kept police busy for years is slowly giving way to restaurants, shops and other forms of entertainment.

Fuller and other observers give a lot of the credit to Edward Baumann and his son, Steve. Since buying eight buildings more than two years ago, the family has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars and is attracting a mix of new tenants.

What the Baumanns are doing is in keeping with the transformation of the Old Port over the past 30 years, as entrepreneurs and developers have remade the once-derelict area into a destination for shopping and entertainment.

"We have a long-term vision for these properties," said Steve Baumann, a commercial broker at C.B. Richard Ellis/The Boulos Co. in Portland.

Baumann is managing the buildings and trying to find new tenants that will improve the area's image. His father, Edward, purchased the properties for \$5.6 million from Joseph Soley. An early investor in Old Port property, Soley tangled with city officials over the years for health and safety violations in some of his buildings, including at least one of the Fore Street properties.

But the Baumanns saw potential in the 19th-century brick buildings. They were especially attracted by the Old World charm of Wharf Street, an alley lined with paving stones.

"It's the quaintest street in the Old Port," Baumann said. "There's so much that can be done with that area."

The Baumanns have made many improvements. Some are cosmetic, others structural. They've repaired roofs and repointed brick, relocated air conditioning units and installed period lighting. And as leases have come up, they've begun shuffling tenants. One change is the disappearance of Wimpy's, a hamburger stand on Union Street that catered to the late-night club crowd. In its place is a new glass facade that houses K&D Sandwich Shop.

At the corner of Wharf and Union streets, the Headliners nightclub is due to close this month and be replaced by a high-end wine bar. Vacant space between 37 Wharf and 45 Wharf will be filled by a new restaurant, which Baumann declined to name.

At 440 Fore St., Diggers bar has been expanded to include barbecue, with lunch and dinner service. Liquid Blue nightclub next door now features comedy shows. The Baumanns have helped the tenants upgrade lighting, floors and furniture. Drinks at the former Tropical Penguin Bar have given way to men's clothing at Haberdashery Hill at 434 Fore St.

"We want to have these businesses open as full-service restaurants, not just bars," Baumann said. "Being open for lunch will help my retailers."

These changes are helping bring more daytime foot traffic to the area, Susan Fuller said. Guests at the Portland Harbor Hotel, the 97-room boutique hotel across Union Street from the Baumann properties, are finding their way down for chocolate and ice cream. Growing commerce, Fuller suggested, might also give tourists walking along

Exchange Street a reason to discover the area, which is a block or so off the beaten path.

The Baumanns also are making the area a more attractive place to live. Nine apartments are located above the stores. The units, where tenants during the 1990s complained about roaches and broken toilets, have been converted to furnished luxury apartments that rent for more than \$1,500 a month.

The transition along Wharf and Fore streets is being watched with interest by Janis Beitzer, executive director of Portland's Downtown District.

"We're totally supportive of what Steve and his dad are doing," she said. "It's becoming more of a mixed entertainment area. It's great to see more than bars."

To retain the area's authentic feel, Beitzer said, the Baumanns will need to strike a balance between entertainment that appeals to local residents and young people and the shops and restaurants that cater to tourists. Baumann agrees with that view. His goal isn't to drive out the music and bar scene, he said, just to have responsible players.

Tom Manning, who owns Diggers, Liquid Blue and the Iguana bar, said he's working with Baumann and investing money to help change the image of some of the businesses there.

"We're looking at how to better position this corner," he said, "which is a central corner in the Old Port."

Also looking to reinvent itself is The Industry, a 13-year-old nightclub.

Brian Hanson, the club's owner, has been working with the Baumanns during the past five months to renovate the interior. The black walls and chain-link fence are gone, he said, replaced with paneling, wood floors and better lighting. Hanson hopes to win city permission to expand food service, offer lunch in the summer and stay open more than just a couple of nights a week.

"We're moving away from the nightclub thing," he said.

Hanson is defensive about lingering public perception of the west end of Wharf Street as a dangerous, rowdy spot after midnight. Stronger police presence and efforts by the Baumanns over the past two years make that view obsolete, he said.

"When I started here," he said, "Wharf Street was the street everybody threw their garbage out on."

Wharf Street is changing, agreed Lt. Janine Roberts, who heads the tactical enforcement unit at the Portland Police Department. Police continue to make arrests and break up a high number of fights in the area, Roberts said, but she is encouraged by the progress.

"The Baumanns are doing a commendable job," she said.

The transformation of the west end of Wharf Street is roughly halfway done now, Steve Baumann said. His plan is to continue filling vacant space with retail and restaurants and improving the entertainment venues.

The family was intrigued recently when a neighboring property, the E. Klamon Bottle building at 428 Fore St., went on the market. The asking price is \$1.9 million. That purchase won't work for his father, Steve Baumann said, but the family hasn't ruled out expanding its empire east toward Dana Street.

"If the deal's right," he said.

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