

## What's so great about Salem? National group names downtown one of America's Top 10

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SALEM — Downtown Salem was named one of the 10 best neighborhoods in America by a national association of planners yesterday during a lunchtime ceremony that doubled as an outdoor block party.

Hundreds gathered in front of Old Town Hall to scoop up free slices of pizza, swipe a complimentary T-shirt and attend a brief ceremony, which included remarks from U.S. Sen. John Kerry.

The American Planning Association dubbed downtown Salem one of the 10 Great Neighborhoods in America for 2008, noting that the city "blends 17th century history and architecture with a 21st century pace and liveliness."

The professional planning association highlighted the construction of Derby Lofts ("attracting a mix of both young adults and empty nesters"), commuter rail and ferry service from Boston that allows access to the downtown without relying on cars and even the annual Witches Cup bike race around Salem Common.

The city shares the distinction with neighborhoods in Los Angeles, Denver and Philadelphia, which were also 2008 recipients.

On the steps of Derby Square, politicians spoke in front of a symbol of the city's historic past — Old Town Hall — and gazed out toward a piece of its future — the redevelopment of the former Salem News building into apartments and retail.

At times, the noise of hammers and machines drowned out the speakers.

Mayor Kim Driscoll cited Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, saying a city's survival is linked to its ability to adapt to change.

"Salem has so many amenities to offer, and we're proud of all of them," she said.

Kerry noted that one of Salem's "favorite sons," Nathaniel Hawthorne, would have found the whole ceremony amusing because of his resentment of politicians. But Salem's distinction as a top American neighborhood is the result of downtown players working cooperatively, he said.

"We're here to celebrate the positive side and what people in public life can get done without partisanship," Kerry said.

"This is a partnership. If you wonder what happens to your tax dollars, this recognition is a stamp of approval for how it's been spent."

The celebration was promoted as a neighborhood block party and featured live music and freebies. Hundreds ate free slices of roasted pepper, pepperoni, and steak and Gorgonzola cheese pizza donated by about a half-dozen downtown restaurants.

Others donned free red T-shirts reading "Celebrate Downtown Salem" on the front and either "I work here" or "I live here" on the back.

The news was a closely guarded secret for about a week. The city publicized the event as a "very special announcement" but offered few clues ahead of time.

Even those walking through the downtown on their lunch break before the formal ceremony yesterday were in the dark.

"I have no idea what it is," said Kate Robinson, a Derby Lofts resident. "I'm glad to see the balloons, so it doesn't seem like bad news. Plus, there's the added benefit of pizza on the table, so I know it's a good thing."

Arthur and Sallie Cote, who live in a condo building on Central Street which was once the police station, moved downtown about three years ago because they wanted a residence on a single floor within walking distance of shops.

"Salem changes all the time," said Arthur Cote, who was wearing his "Celebrate Downtown Salem" shirt after the ceremony. "Now it's at a point where it's getting better and better."

Great Neighborhoods in America

Charles Village (Baltimore, Md.)

Downtown Salem

Downtown Sheridan (Sheridan, Wyo.)

Echo Park (Los Angeles, Calif.)

Greater Park Hill (Denver, Colo.)

Greater University Hill (Syracuse, N.Y.)

North End (Boise, Idaho)

Old Town (Wichita, Kan.)

Society Hill (Philadelphia, Pa.)

Village of Mariemont (Mariemont, Ohio)

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Photos



The pedestrian mall: Cobbled streets and historic architecture blend with restaurants, shops and activities like street fairs. File photo



The Salem ferry: The ferry and commuter rail make it possible to get into and out of the city without a car. File photo

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Sen. John Kerry speaks about Salem being part of the 2008 Great Neighborhoods in America. The announcement was made in front of Old Town Hall in the middle of the day yesterday. Staff Photographer



Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll listens to Steve Sadwick, Massachusetts Chapter president of the American Planning Association. Staff Photographer