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Parking restrictions loosened for mill project

By **DINA MENDROS**

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BIDDEFORD — Passage of an amendment to the land use regulations will allow a 66-unit residential complex in the mill district to progress. The ordinance, approved by City Council on June 16, will allow greater flexibility of parking requirements in the city's downtown and mill district.

Without the change, said developer Nathan Szanton, the principal of Workforce Housing LLC the corporation developing the project, he could not move forward.

The amendment allows for an applicant to apply to the Planning Board for a waiver of the city's parking design regulations.

In Szanton's case, he needs a waiver so he can create enough parking spots at the site as required by some of his financing sources.

Szanton spoke in favor of the amendment. He said it was necessary "to adapt ... Laconia Mill number 1 into high quality rental housing."

The Mill at Saco Falls is

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proposed to be built at Riverdam Mill (formerly Laconia,) which was purchased by businessman Stephen Goodrich in December for \$500,000. Goodrich agreed to sell the building to Szanton for his project in March.

Szanton had been working on his plans prior to Goodrich's purchase, while another development group had an option to buy Riverdam.

The project has already received preliminary approval by the Planning Board. Passage of this ordinance was one of the necessary steps to receive final approval.

The board "can't give final approval unless (the project) meets the regulations," said City Planner Greg Tansley.

The development will be a mix of affordable and market rate units. Eligibility for the affordable units will be subject

to income limits.

The project proposes 33 one-bedroom units, 25 two-bedroom units and eight three-bedroom units. All units will include heat, hot water and one parking spot.

Szanton said he plans to perform many improvements to the exterior of the building from repointing the bricks to rebuilding the roof.

Work is planned to begin in August, depending on financing, said Szanton.

Financing for the project, said Szanton, will come from state and federal historic tax credits; a HOPE 6 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; and loans from the Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission, the Maine Housing Authority and conventional financial institutions.

Szanton had initially planned to ask city officials for

Tax Increment Financing funds through a state program that allows a portion of the property tax from new valuation to be used by developers for their project. However, he said, he believes that will be unnecessary because he hopes to qualify for stimulus money through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed by Congress in February.

"This is a progressive step" for the downtown and mill district, said Councilor Bob Mills whose ward covers that area. "I fully support this on a case by case basis."

The amendment was passed as an emergency measure so that Planning Board could have the ability to grant the waiver and final approval to the project in July. It became effective Monday.

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