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Developer receives approval for Biddeford mill plan

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BIDDEFORD — Another milestone for mill development in Biddeford was reached Wednesday when the Planning Board gave final approval to a project to build 66 residential rental units at Riverdam Mill.

Although there are other rental units in Biddeford's mill district, like those in the North Dam Mill complex, The Mill at Saco Falls will be the first major renovation project at Riverdam

since it was purchased by Falmouth-based developer and businessman Stephen Goodrich for \$500,000 at a foreclosure auction in December.

The 66-unit housing complex, which will feature amenities such as a fitness center, a theater room and a common room with computer access, will also be the largest completely residential development in the district when completed.

If all goes as planned, Nathan Szanton, managing director of Maine

Workforce Housing, LLC, which is developing The Mill at Saco Falls, hopes to begin construction within the next two months he told the Planning Board. He hopes to have the units ready to rent by July 1, 2010.

"I'm very pleased we're finished with the Planning Board process," said Szanton. "This is a major milestone in the development of the project."

Forty of the units being developed are termed "workforce" units. These one, two and three bedroom units will

rent at below market rate. People renting these lower priced units must meet certain income guidelines.

The remaining 26 units will be priced at market rate.

Despite the board's approval, there are still several hurdles Szanton and his group must jump before they can begin construction.

One such hurdle includes finalizing his last piece of financing to renovate the historic building. Szanton estimates his total construction cost at just

under \$10 million.

Szanton is waiting to hear if he will qualify for stimulus money authorized by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed by Congress earlier this year.

A significant portion of financing was officially secured just last week when City Council authorized the city manager to sign over to Maine

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Workforce Housing a \$1 million federal HOPE 6 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The grant was awarded to the city specifically for this project.

Other money will come from federal and state historic tax credits. In 2008, the Biddeford-Saco Mill District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, which allows developers within the district's boundaries to apply for historic tax credits.

In addition to funding, before construction can begin Szanton needs easements for

sewer and storm water improvements, said City Planner Greg Tansley.

One issue that was put to bed Wednesday was parking. The applicant had applied for a parking waiver, which the Planning Board granted. The project will only have 77 parking spots for the 66-unit development — 55 fewer than required by city ordinance.

However, last month, City Council passed an emergency measure allowing the Planning Board to grant such a waiver. The waiver is needed due to existing conditions, said Tansley, since the buildings cannot be moved.

Planning Engineer Jennie Franceschi said the city's parking ordinance was designed for

parking at suburban shopping centers not the city's downtown and mill district.

One of the items on his to-do list, said Tansley, is to rewrite the parking standards for the downtown.

The building that will house The Mill at Saco Falls was built in 1845, said Szanton. It was the second building constructed in Biddeford's mill district, he said, and the first built for Laconia textile manufacturing, the company which eventually became part of what is now known as WestPoint Home.

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