

FOCUS YORK COUNTY

Where possibilities loom

Biddeford marks the end of its textile era, with one foot firmly in the future

BY JACKIE FARWELL

When the shift let out at Biddeford's booming textile mills in the early 1900s, the streets were so packed with workers one could hardly move, local lore has it. But as demand for U.S.-made bed sheets and blankets waned and production shifted overseas, bit by bit the mills began to close. Now, after more than 150 years in operation, WestPoint Home, the last vestige of Biddeford's textile heritage, is closing.

The city hasn't given up on the 32-acre mill complex, however, as an economic engine for the area. The WestPoint property, a sprawling collection of a dozen buildings lining Main Street, is central to redevelopment plans. So while the city mourns the loss of 121 jobs and the long-expected end of its textile era, there's excitement about the opportunities WestPoint's closing offers.

Company officials say the layoffs will

occur this month, but there's talk of extending operations into August to fill a few remaining orders. New York-based WestPoint is also closing plants in Elkin, N.C., and Chipley, Fla., leaving only one plant in Greenville, Ala. The company's run in Biddeford will officially cease when workers turn out their last Vellux blanket, WestPoint's sole remaining product here. The blankets are made through a non-textile flocking process that rescued the mill from obsolescence 40 years ago as the city's cotton-weaving mills died out. The company, which emerged from bankruptcy in 2005, has, more than once, hung on by only a thread.

As hard as the city's worked to resuscitate the mill over the years, it's also been planning for its demise. Two versions of the city's mill district development plan, which will be released to the public in its final form within weeks, were initially prepared: one assuming WestPoint was still operating and one based on its



Women at work in the Pepperell Mill in 1910, part of the textile mill complex that now houses WestPoint Home

absence. No one wants to see a neighbor out of a job, but Biddeford has worked hard to shed the stigma of a stagnant mill town.

"I don't think anyone's surprised by it, but I think people are shocked by it because it's the end of a 150-year era here," says Rachael Weyand, executive director of Heart of Biddeford, a downtown revitalization program. Apart from the workers, many in Biddeford have always viewed the mill as off-limits pri-

vate property, she says. "It's hard for a community that's seen those buildings one way for 150 years to see them as public."

The shuttering of WestPoint may conclusively mark the end of the city's textile mills, but officials and developers have been moving on for several years now. Making a point to recognize the distress caused by losing more than 100 jobs, City Manager John Bubier says Biddeford couldn't afford to sit on its hands. "This is simply something we had anticipated," he says. "It was a question of when, not whether."

complex is selling for \$2.245 million, and is "probably one of the nicest I've ever seen," says Tripp Corson of NAI The Dunham Group in Portland, which is brokering the property. The buildings have been well cared for and will not require much remediation, he says. The WestPoint property is assessed by the city at about \$5.2 million, which makes for an annual tax burden of \$77,186.

Portland developer Nathan Szanton is so "bullish about Biddeford," he's making the city his first foray into historic mill reuse. With partner Robert C.S. Monks, he's building 66 mixed-income residential units in an 80,000-square-foot section of the Riverdam Mill, which was purchased

heating costs. "It's an expensive property for someone to own. Until they figure out what they're doing with it, there will be significant costs on a monthly and yearly basis," he says. Still, certainty about the mill's fate allows the city to implement redevelopment plans for commercial, residential and light industrial uses, Betjemann says. "In this one area, you could literally live and work, spend no time commuting," he says.

Signing off

The city's mill district development plan envisions an "urban village" comprised of about 45% residential, 25% com-

mercial and 30% industrial use. It also includes plans to add up to 3,500 parking spaces and a river walk. Bounded by Main Street, Lincoln Street and the Saco River, the district includes about 2 million square feet of mill space and the controversial Maine Energy Recovery Co. trash incinerator. The district plan, along with last year's passage of state tax credits for

development of historic buildings, has paved the way for growth.

WestPoint workers are happy to see the old buildings redeveloped, despite the pang of their own loss, says George "Pete" Lamontagne, who's worked at the mill for 37 years and also serves on the City Council. "We've seen the deterioration of those fine old mills and knowing they're going to be rehabbed is pretty good for us," he says. Still, he recalls the frustration of trying for two hours, unsuccessfully, on a recent shopping trip to find a U.S.-made shirt.

The rise of textile manufacturing in China and India casts a painful irony today on WestPoint's distinctive logo. The griffin-like creature is a slight modification of the original 1800s insignia that combined dragon and lion imagery to appeal to consumers in the Far East, once a major destination for the mill's textiles. "It's the end of manufacturing in Biddeford," Lamontagne said. "When I started there were over 3,000 people. Now, there's just over 100." The 121 workers remaining at WestPoint total almost exactly the number now employed at Sanford's North Dam Mill. "As much as it's painful," Sanford says, "it was always going to happen."

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The pitch of his voice escalates as he ticks off the attractions that drew him to Biddeford from Seacoast New Hampshire 25 years ago: its proximity to Portland, Portsmouth and the ocean; solid and historic mill buildings downtown; ready access to Interstate-95, an Amtrak station and an airport 15 minutes away; the intellectual hum of the University of New England; affordability; talented artists and craftspeople.

The WestPoint property, linked to North Dam through heating and sprinkler systems, has in recent years proved imposing in both its physical mass and uncertain future. Billionaire and corporate raider Carl Icahn bought the business, then known as WestPoint Stevens, four years ago for \$703.5 million. Icahn's executives have since proven uncommunicative, Sanford says. "We're attached at the hip," he says of WestPoint and North Dam. "It's very tough moving forward when you have this Siamese twin attached to you not moving in the same direction."

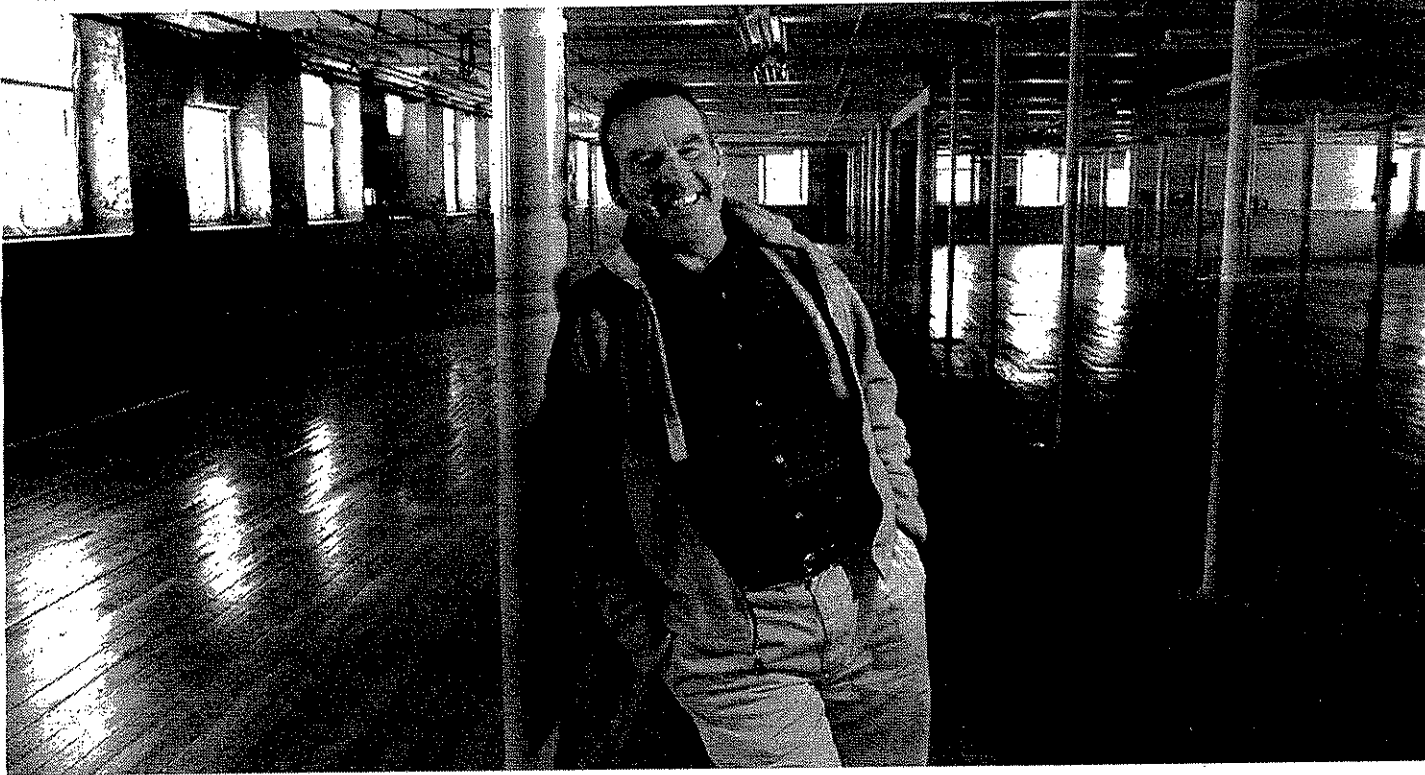
So, Sanford might buy the WestPoint property. The 713,200-square-foot mill

last December by Stephen Goodrich, CEO of Portland payment processing company PowerPay. Szanton hopes to close on the property by late August.

Chris Betjemann, who with partner Greg Bennett owns the Lincoln Mill across the street from City Hall, says he's heard the WestPoint property has remediation issues and carries substantial tax and

"You will not recognize this community in 15 years."

Developer Doug Sanford



A new future

Doug Sanford's name often arises in talk about Biddeford's future. He owns the North Dam Mill — a three-building complex on the Saco River that was once an electric blanket factory — that feels like the genesis of the city's rebirth. Walking the refurbished maple floors of the maze-like structure, which houses more than 150 residential and commercial tenants from woodworkers to bookbinders, Sanford sometimes gets so excited talking about Biddeford's potential that he has to catch his breath. "You will not recognize this community in 15 years," he says.

Sanford, who's been rehabilitating old construction in the Biddeford area since the 1980s, bought the complex in 2004.

Doug Sanford, pictured in his North Dam Mill complex, might buy the adjoining WestPoint property

Mill makeovers

- 1. WestPoint Home**
Square feet: 713,200
- 2. North Dam Mill**
Square feet: 370,000
Owner: Doug Sanford
Use: Mixed, 150 residential and commercial tenants
- 3. Riverdam Mill**
Square feet: 330,000
Owner: Stephen Goodrich
Use: Plans for mixed-use
- 4. The Mill at Saco Falls**
Square feet: 80,000
Developer: Nathan Szanton and Robert C.S. Monks
Use: Plans for 66 mixed-income housing units
- 5. Lincoln Mill**
Square feet: 238,000
Owner: Chris Betjemann and Greg Bennett
Use: Light industrial, 35 tenants
- 6. TLC Bugbee-Brown**
Square feet: 44,000
Owner: John Tarbox
Use: Small startup incubator, 25 tenants
- 7. Saco-Lowell Shops**
Square feet: 160,000
Owner: Diane Doyle
Use: To be determined

