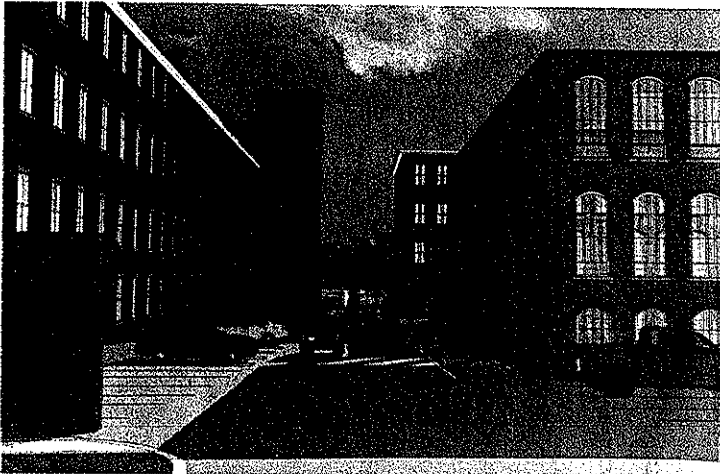


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A rendering of "The Mill at Saco Falls" illustrates what it will look like when completed. The 66-unit apartment complex, which will consist of affordable and market rate housing, is planned to be completed by the summer of 2010.

At old mill complex, future takes shape as housing project

By DINA MENDROS
Staff Writer

BIDDEFORD —

Preliminary approval to build the largest housing development in Biddeford's mill district to date was granted by the Planning Board on Wednesday. The subdivision plan for The Mill at Saco Falls calls for building 66-units, a combination of affordable and market-rate housing, in one of the buildings of the Riverdam mill complex.

Nathan Szanton, the principal of Workforce Housing, LLC, the company developing the project, will have to come back before the board again for final approval. However, he

said, the initial approval gives his company the green light to move forward.

If all goes as planned, Szanton said, he hopes to finalize his financing for the project by the beginning of August, start construction soon after, and have the building ready for occupancy by the summer of 2010.

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

WestPoint Home.

Today, WestPoint Home, the last textile mill in the mill district, is preparing to close for good this summer.

"It's clear the future of the mill district is not in heavy manufacturing but in a mixture," of light industrial, office and retail space and housing, said Szanton.

This project, he said, "will give a shot of economic adrenaline into the veins of downtown Biddeford." People living in his complex will walk the streets of the downtown and frequent the businesses

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located there, he said.

The apartment complex will house 33 one-bedroom units, 25 two-bedroom units, and eight three-bedroom units. All will include heat, hot water and a parking spot.

Forty of the units will be "work-force" housing, which require occupants to make no more than a certain income level and will rent for several hundred dollars less than the 26 other units, which will rent at the market rate.

The apartment complex will also feature amenities such as wireless Internet access, a common room with computer access, a theater room, a fitness room and storage space for bicycles and kayaks.

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.

The developer said he has also been negotiating with city officials for tax increment financing funds. The TIF program is a state program which allows some or all of the property tax generated from new valuation to be set aside from the municipal general fund, for up to 30 years, and be used, among other ways, for some aspects of the projects which generate the new revenue.

The city is dedicated to redeveloping the mill district, as evidenced by prior zoning ordi-

nances and the mill district master plan it commissioned which should be finished soon, said Planning Director Greg Tansley.

However, he noted, "This is a challenging district to redevelop."

One challenge is parking. Szanton's plan calls for only 77 parking spots for the 66 units, and 20 of those spots will be shared with a neighboring property owner.

The city's parking ordinance may need to be amended to allow for the Planning Board to provide waivers for parking designs in the mill district, said Tansley, to allow maximum parking.

The board gave him the go-ahead to create draft language for the amendment. Any ordinance amendment would eventually have to go to City

Council for final approval.

Other challenges that were discussed on Wednesday included traffic, pedestrian safety and working with neighboring property owners, including the Maine Energy Recovery Company waste-to-energy incinerator, which owns the access way from Lincoln Street to the planned The Mill at Saco Falls.

"We're really committed to being a good neighbor," said Szanton.

Szanton purchased the building from Stephen Goodrich, who bought the Riverdam Complex during a foreclosure auction in December for \$500,000. Szanton's plans are the first Riverdam project to go before the Planning Board.

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