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Above: Robert CS Monks, a developer of The Mill at Saco Falls, delivers a speech Monday at the official groundbreaking for the Biddeford mill, currently known as part of the Riverdam Mill. It will be revamped to house apartments, the first of which should be ready in October. Below: Nathan Szanton, developer and managing partner of Maine Workforce Housing, LLC, which is redeveloping part of Riverdam Mill into The Mill at Saco Falls, delivers a speech Monday at the official groundbreaking for the mill in Biddeford.

Mill housing project breaks ground

By **DINA MENDROS**
Staff Writer

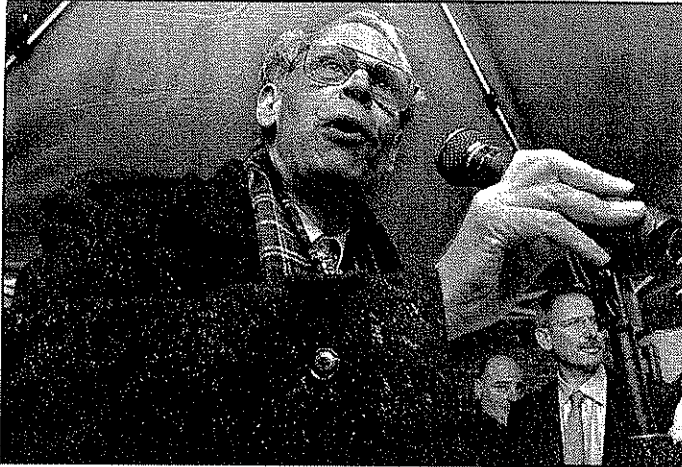
BIDDEFORD — More than two dozen people braved the wind and rain on Monday to witness the groundbreaking for the redevelopment of one of the former Riverdam Mill buildings, which is being transformed into a 66-unit residential complex.

Some stood under a blue canopy, others under umbrellas, as they listened to speakers talk about how the transformation of former Laconia Mill building one, built in 1845, marks what the developers hope is the beginning of a trend for mill redevelopment in Biddeford.

"This is the vision for Biddeford," said Mayor Joanne Twomey, one of the speakers.



See Saco Falls



Historian Earle Shettleworth, director of the Maine Historic Preservation Committee, delivers a speech Monday at the official groundbreaking for the Riverdam Mill in Biddeford. The mill will be revamped to house apartments, the first of which should be ready in October, and will be renamed The Mill at Saco Falls. Below: Nathan Szanton, far left, developer and managing partner of Maine Workforce Housing, LLC, is silhouetted as he guides a tour of the progress inside the mill, Monday.

JEFF LAGASSE/Journal Tribune

Saco Falls

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"Biddeford is on the move."

Earl Shettleworth, the director of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, said Biddeford is turning its liabilities, of empty mill buildings, into assets. The city, he said, has become rediscovered and is being reinvented, while fashioning its future out of its past.

Tuesday's groundbreaking was only ceremonial, as work at the site began on Dec. 29, said Nathan Szanton.

Szanton and Robert CS Monks are partners in Maine Workforce Housing, LLC which is the developer of the \$15 million project that will create 40 affordable housing units, and 26 housing units that will be rented at the market rate.

The building, which is part of the 10-building Riverdam Mill complex, was purchased from Steven Goodrich for \$600,000. Goodrich bought the entire complex for \$500,000 in December 2008.



Financing is coming from \$3 million in tax credits, made available for the project through the state's historic tax credit program.

The Maine State Housing Authority is providing \$600,000 in deferred loans, and an additional \$6.2 million in tax credit exchange and tax credit assistance program funds funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

The affordable units will be available to those who make a maximum of 50 percent of the York County median income. For a family of four, that is approximately \$32,000; or \$26,000 for a family of two.

The first units will be available beginning this fall. Affordable units will rent for \$550 for one bedroom, \$670 for two bedrooms and \$790 for three bedrooms. The market rate price will be \$760 for a one bedroom unit and \$885 for a two bedroom unit. There will be no three-bedroom units offered at the market rate price, said Szanton.

Heat, hot water, and free wireless Internet service will be included in the rent, he said, and the building will have a number of amenities such as a fitness center, computer room, theater room and laundry.

The six-story structure will retain much of the building's original architecture, said Szanton.

On the interior, the wooden carrying beams on all but the

top floor will be exposed, with those on the top floor insulated and covered, and the beveling around the windows will remain.

On the exterior, the cornices and brick will be preserved.

"These buildings have so much character," said Szanton. "We can't afford to put those kinds of details in buildings today."

The developer, who has constructed a number of new housing units, said this was his first mill redevelopment project.

The building will be made energy efficient, said Szanton, with, among other things, new windows, insulation – which will cover the interior brick walls – and a solar hot water system.

Szanton said most of the units will be affordable units because he believes that provides the best chance for success of the project.

While the tone of Monday's ceremony was upbeat, at least one person voiced some cautionary concern about the project. Former Saco Mayor Mark Johnston said he wondered how these new units would affect the current housing market and noted that the vacancy rate for apartments in Biddeford and Saco is at an all time high.

The vacancy rate is the highest he has seen in his eight years working for the city, said Biddeford Code Enforcement

Officer Roby Fecteau.

Maine Housing Director Dale McCormick, one of the speakers, said in addition to creating affordable housing, construction at the site is providing on-the-job training for some of the workers.

Wright-Ryan of Portland is the contractor for the project.

Although he believes there are construction companies in Biddeford that could handle the job, Szanton said he went with Wright-Ryan Construction because he has worked with the company on past projects.

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