

Thinning the mills in Franklin

By ROGER AMSDEN
Union Leader Correspondent
Saturday, Nov. 25, 2006

Franklin – Farmers know that good root crops like carrots and beets require that the rows be thinned of excess seedlings so that the remaining plants can reach their full growth potential.

Something of the same approach may be needed with the nearly 300,000 square feet of space available in the Franklin Falls Historic District, a cluster of historic 19th century mills near the Winnepesaukee River where at one point more than 1,000 people were employed making knitting machine needles, hosiery, textiles and saws,

Now two of those mills, the Riverbend Mill, where the Franklin Needle Company was once located, and the Stanley Mill, where saws, particularly hacksaws, were made, are vacant. Further up the river, the 186,000-square-foot Stevens Mill has only about 40 percent of its available space filled.

Revitalizing those mills is seen as the key to restoring prosperity to this city's downtown area, which has been but a shell of its former bustling self ever since the Stevens Mill closed its doors in 1970, throwing hundreds out of work.

When Newberry's closed its Central Street store in 1990, the last national retailer disappeared from downtown and the store eventually ended up being owned by the city in lieu of back taxes. It was turned over to the fledgling Franklin Business and Industrial Development Council, which within a few short years reached the conclusion that the property was unmarketable because it would require more investment to bring it up to codes than would ever be realistically recouped at the going commercial rental rates.

The building was torn down, opening a small gateway into the mill complex, but still not enough of a gateway to draw investment into the older mills.

Now the city is seriously looking at a revitalization plan for the district which could see some or parts of some of the mill buildings fall to the wrecking ball to create the kind of infrastructure, including additional parking and utilities, which would invite retail and business office development in the former manufacturing facilities.

A Plan NH design charrette held in June came up with several options for the mill district, including the partial dismantling of some of the buildings. One plan even included a bridge across to the river to Bow Street to solve some of the access problems for vehicular traffic.

James Aberg, executive director of the FBIDC, said the development organization is acting on the ideas that came out of the Plan NH session by hiring Municipal Resources Inc. to develop an action plan for the historic district.

He said the company helped develop plans for the revitalization of Littleton and is currently working on a similar project in Troy.

He said the company's first order of business will be to document existing conditions by inspecting all the buildings with the permission of the property owners. Next, they will meet with the property owners to see what they would like to see happen with the mills and be in touch with city officials and the city planning staff to gather their perspectives.

Aberg said that one of the keys to redeveloping the area will be a reworking of the city's zoning ordinance so that it will permit more mixed uses, including retail, commercial, business office and housing within the district.

He said there will also need to be a strong municipal component to the revitalization plans since many of the changes which may be proposed will require local government action or support.

MRI will develop a working strategy for the revitalization project, as well as a financing and marketing plan which will be submitted to the city by early next spring. The company will also recommend potential funding sources, including those which can be derived from grant money.

"It's going to be a public and private partnership. We expect that FBIDC will be playing a leading role in implementation of the plan," Aberg said.