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## A Mill with a Mission

Riverdam's new owner looks to the future

By NICK COWNHOVEN/ Journal Tribune

BIDDEFORD—As the new landlord of a sprawling mil complex next to the Saco River, Steven Sobol feels a responsibility to preserve the open workrooms, large freight elevators and solid brick walls at Riverdam Millyard.

He believes he can pay his bills and be a good downtown citizen by filling much of its 330,000 square feet with entrepreneurs and artisans. "Riverdam can be an important asset to Biddeford," he said, providing jobs and broadening the tax base.

"The best use for this building is to maintain it as working space," he said. "I would love to see this building filled with people making things."

But the challenge of preserving this complex is complicated by the need to make it accessible and to provide safe exit routes in case of fire. Constructing new hallways and enclosing staircases, work that is already underway, will consume some of the industrial open space in this rambling neighborhood of connected buildings.

Money is another complicating factor. Sobol acquired the property on December 30 at the low rice of \$945,000, but the proposed improvements go far beyond the \$500,000 he originally budgeted.

He now has an estimate for \$1.4 million in improvements that includes more than the upgrades required for safety. Replacing Riverdam's 750 windows, for instance, would make the building much more energy efficient, but would cost more than \$250,000, according to Sobol.

"I knew it all had to be done. Knowing that it's more than \$1.4 million means it will happen over a longer period of time," said Sobol, a former New York resident now living in Deer Isle.

There are currently 35 tenants in Riverdam. Some lease storage space, while others have put the mill's space to work more creatively. Utopia Designs, for instance is fabricating furnishings for

restaurants and Custom Restraint and Strap stitches nylon and polyester strapping into tie-downs and lifting slings.

"Occupancy has dropped in recent years. When a previous owner faced financial problems, heat wasn't reliably available and the city threatened to shutter the building for code violations.

According to a recent survey of former Biddeford mills, Riverdam's tenants include artists, woodworkers and cabinetmakers, a window-replacement manufacturer and a plastics production company, among others. According to the survey, tenants like the open space available in Biddeford's old mills, and they love the low rents.

One long term tenant believes that because Sobol can offer plenty of space at low rates, he will have no trouble filling the building with commercial tenants.

David Vaillancourt of Eastern Bag Connection occupies four floors, where 25 employees clean, repair, and recycle industrial bags used by industries to transport raw materials. Vaillancourt has been a tenant at Riverdam since 1989 and currently occupies about 40,000 square feet.

"Move this to Portland and ask what this space would rent for," he said. "If you are looking for suitable industrial space, it is very difficult to find, and fairly expensive."

Occupancy of Riverdam Millyard was once around 80 percent, Vaillancourt said, until management problems drove many tenants out.

Sobol hopes to collaborate with other entrepreneurs who have invested in mill buildings here, and he envisions an advertising campaign in Boston newspapers – "Come and do business in Biddeford."

His real estate agent, Tripp Corson, of NAI The Dunham Group, said space is listed for \$4.50 per square foot and he suggests a sales pitch of his own.

"It's a good opportunity to get in on the ground floor," he said.

Sobol is receiving inquiries from prospective tenants, but is focusing on bringing the complex up to code and out of the crosshairs of city and state enforcement agencies.

David Landmann, an architect and planner, said Riverdam Millyard grew and evolved with little thought given for worker safety. During a tour last week, he pointed to an example – a steel door on rollers, held open by a cable and a "fusible link" designed to melt if fire breaks out. A fire in a work room would cause the steel door to close.

"It protects the building, but it doesn't help the people get out," he said.

Landmann said the top priority is to create fire-safe hallways and stairwells in a building that wasn't designed for them. The effort requires new walls, fire-rated doors and a sprinkler system upgrade.

Offsetting the expense of a major upgrade, he said, is 220,000 square feet of vacant space, much of it overlooking a spectacular view that most residents have never seen: The Saco River rushing over rocks and falls, surrounded by the brick mill architecture of Biddeford and Saco.

Sobol, who also owns an office building in Lewiston, said he intends to make the renovation and management of Riverdam Millyard his career for the indefinite future. He has applied for a loan from the Biddeford-Saco Area Economic Development Corporation and is getting to know the community.

If all goes as planned, he expects the community to share the prosperity of the revitalized Riverdam Millyard.

"I'm one-third full and there are about 75 people working here," he said. "We could end up with 250 or 300 jobs. That's significant job creation for a city the size of Biddeford."

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