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Riverdam Millyard finds interested tenants

By KRISTEN MUSZYNSKI/ Journal Tribune

BIDDEFORD—Though their skills vary from binding books or arranging flowers to designing Web sites, the new tenants at Riverdam Millyard all have one thing in common – enthusiasm about the location. Though not easily visible to the passerby, the large vacant-looking mills are actually filling with eager entrepreneurs, artists and industry.

Their interest in the old mill is seen as an encouraging sign for its eventual restoration, as well as the long-range plans of Biddeford's downtown redevelopment. Much work, investment and marketing lies ahead, however, if the effort is to succeed.

For Albert Nickerson, owner of "I Love Flowers," moving his business from Portland to Biddeford made sense. He came to Riverdam earlier this year when he found that his expensive retail storefront was not worth the money. Since the bulk of his business is large-event orders, rather than retail sales, Nickerson has found the mill spot to be perfect and he has renovated his bright space with new windows, paint and decorations. Since his move, Nickerson said that word is getting around about the possibilities in Biddeford.

"There's certainly a buzz going on. It's beginning – you can see it," said Nickerson.

The Riverdam Millyard, located at the end of Pearl Street behind the Maine Energy plant, has been in the process of redevelopment for nearly one year under the management of new owner Steven Sobol. Nearly 50 tenants have taken space in the enormous building, from light industrial companies to those in the "creative economy."

Nickerson's excitement about the mill is nearly matched by Scott Mullenberg, a book binder who has recently moved into the building from Portland, in an effort to save money and be closer to Kennebunk.

"When I come here, I'm inspired to work," he said. "I like the vibe."

His neighbor, Carole McCarty of Bottom-Feeder, a multimedia company, agrees that "the creative vibe is great." Her office has a cozy look to it, with a miniature kitchen and living room, hanging lights, refinished hardwood floors and walls stripped to the brick. McCarty came all the way from California to promote her company's T-shirts and Web design skills here, and said she found out about the mill vacancy while searching online.

"I see the potential here," she said.

Of the 300,000 square feet in the mill, 145,000 has been rented out so far, said Sobol. Riverdam has 16 band rehearsal spaces and will soon be welcoming North Atlantic Leather. Half of the remaining space is available for rent, but the other half needs more work. The building is being fixed up "little by little," said Sobol, but it has a history of neglect and basic components such as the roof and heating need immediate attention.

Dunham Group Industrial Broker Tripp Corson, who is representing Riverdam Millyard acknowledged the difficulties of renovating such an old building but said the firm is "marketing it as hard as we can."

"For a building that was once so vital to the economy, it's nice to see someone willing to fix it up," said Corson.

Sobol, of Falmouth, purchased Riverdam Millyard in December of 2004, leaving a career managing the careers of classical musicians in New York. Since then upgrades to the fire alarm and sprinkler systems, new walls and doors and cosmetics such as refinishing the entryway floor and painting have all served to clean up the inside of the mill. Sobol estimates that the repairs, along with sealing the windows with plastic to keep in heat, have cost \$400,000.

Still, Sobol notes that there is "work to be done," evidenced by leaks in the roof and large, dark vacant spaces that are not yet up to code for leasing. With a need for tenants to provide funds for building repairs and a need for building repairs to attract tenants, Sobol finds himself in a Catch-22 situation, but is keeping a positive attitude.

"I did as much as I could, as fast as I could," said Sobol. "Now I need to let the building catch up to itself."

Stepping over a pool of water collected on the wooden floor during Tuesday's rains, Sobol said the roof leaks are "discouraging" but really only require minor patching as a fix. Crews are regularly in the building working on repairs and sealing windows.

Support from the city has been strong, said Sobol, as he and city officials share the goal of revitalizing downtown through the mills. The Biddeford/Saco Area Economic Development Corporation offered financial help for Sobol to make improvements, he said, and the mill is in a state Pine Tree Zone, which allows tenants to receive various tax breaks. Additionally, both the Chamber of Commerce and the city have referred possible tenants to local mill buildings.

Sobol has other suggestions for revitalizing the mill, such as a "section 8" type program, modeled on federal support for low-cost housing. Such a program would allow tenants to pay a lower rate, with the remainder subsidized by the state. He is also considering the idea of allowing tenants to renovate their space while he allows them temporary free rent.

"We see the mills as a lynchpin for revitalization of the downtown, by their size and location and historic appeal," said Economic Development Director Bob Dodge. "They have tremendous promise."

To help the mills come back to life, Dodge said that the city revised

Downtown zoning four years ago to allow mixed uses in mills, including housing and retails. The city also allowed mill owners flexibility with bringing the buildings up to code, recognizing the

“That should definitely be a component,” said Dodge.

Sobol and other mill owners have expressed interest in having a cultural center. Sobol said

Even the mill’s location next to Maine Energy does not dampen Sobol’s spirits. Before the vote on November 8, proponents of closure for the trash incineration plant stressed that the mills will be difficult to fill because of its presence nearby. Sobol disagrees that Maine Energy is the reigning negative force against revitalization and said that the company has been a good neighbor.

“Even if it ceased to be, I have many other nooses around my neck that will determine my success or failure here,” he said. “Life in Biddeford has grown and thrived regardless of MERC

expense, said Dodge.

"(Sobol) has done a tremendous job at a great expense to upgrade the life safety issues that were of greatest concern to the city," said Dodge.

Within the next two years, the city has planned to allot \$50,000 to develop a concept plan for all of the city's mills as part of the Community Development Block Grant program.

Little public investment is expected, but Dodge said he envisions public spaces along the waterfront and some sort of preservation/museum area in one of the mills to commemorate their 150-year history.

he doesn't see himself as a developer, however, but as a steward, and when he purchased the mill, he looked at it as a career change rather than an investment. He spends his days promoting the mill, giving tours to prospective tenants, overseeing repairs and even sweeping the halls. Sobol said he hopes to pass it on to his (now 2-year-old) son.

"I believe this place has a lot of beauty and potential to it," he said. The first six months was a struggle, but since July, Sobol has rented 30,000 square feet at an average of \$6.75 per square foot. The new tenants "validate" his position that people would respond to the mill's charm if it was cared for, he said.

and we can make it happen. Here's living proof right here."

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