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NEWS

At Williams College, a \$278 million building boom fuels local economy



A local group has proposed plans to renovate the Redwood Motel in North Adams, along with the conservation and repurposing of the surrounding land, including the Blackinton Mill. A smokestack at the mill is seen Thursday through one of the mill's windows.

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NORTH ADAMS — The team responsible for re-imagining the Redwood Motel as a celebration of its natural surroundings has embarked on a much more ambitious multimillion dollar concept involving the Blackinton Mill and about 30 acres of riverside property for recreational uses.

In November, developers expect to close on their purchase of the Blackinton Mill and some adjacent property across the Hoosic River from the Redwood. Using other properties nearby, with the permission of the owners, the team hopes to develop a system of trails for walking and biking, even cross-country skiing, and some activity centers at various location throughout the complex, including a foot bridge across the river.

The Redwood was purchased for \$350,000 by Beyond Place LLC, on April 15.

The team includes lead developer Ben Svenson and his brother Eric Svenson; Wilco bassist John Stirratt, Dana Nielsen of Broder Properties, Scott Stedman of Brooklyn Magazine, Simeon Bruner of Bruner/Cott Architects, Bigs Waterman with Waterman Excavating and project manager Eric Kerns.

Since starting the design of the Redwood project, Svenson and Kerns had been exploring the land behind the motel around the river, and discovered that land once used as an old sewage treatment facility — closed since the 1970s — has become partially forested and is located at the riverside. It connects to the parcels the team will purchase, and also connects to the Redwood property on the other side of the river.

Taken together, the properties are also at the meeting point of the original Mohawk Trail, the Appalachian Trail and the Hoosic River.

“There’s an amazing confluence on this particular spot,” said John Stirratt. “It’s the intersection of two historic thoroughfares, the Appalachian Trail and the Mohawk Trail, and an exceptionally beautiful stretch of the Hoosic River. And yet it’s not currently used by the community in any meaningful way.”

And while the site is bordered by State Road, Massachusetts Avenue and Ashton Avenue, anyone who goes down to the river loses any sense of the urban landscape.

“It’s an astonishing place,” Svenson said. “You can lose yourself in a place that has no sign of the built environment nearby.”

He referred to it as a “Never-Never Land.”

Since buying the Redwood, the development team has been working closely with state and local officials, including North Adams Mayor Richard Alcombright, state Sen. Ben Downing, D-Pittsfield, Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Jay Ash, state Rep. Gailann Cariddi, D-North Adams, and state agencies like the Massachusetts Office of Business Development, MassDEP, the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game, and the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, to develop a strategy to develop a complex concept that could result in a number of sustainable community assets.

During an announcement of the plans Thursday, Ben Svenson said the tenants currently in the Blackinton Mill will remain. How the mill plays into the overall plan isn’t clear yet, and conceptual discussions are ongoing. But with so many cultural attractions nearby, the arts will play some role in whatever happens.

“This project has blossomed into something much bigger than I could have imagined,” Alcombright said.

One of the tenants of the mill is the Williamstown Theatre Festival, which has its set-building operation there. Svenson said that is a good example of a use that would be compatible with the overall concept.

The Blackinton Mill has a fascinating history and connection to the region’s industrial past, including the Civil War, and in researching the project and the purchase of the mill, the team has been researching the site and sees an important opportunity to connect local history to the current projects.

“Some of the first manufacturing in the region was based right here, beginning in the 1830s, when Sanford Blackinton and two partners built the initial factory and surrounding neighborhood that would expand and contract and expand again, mirroring the larger story of North Adams over two centuries,” Svenson said. “We want to collaborate on writing the next chapter of this story, in which our projects play a vital role in North Adams’ continued evolution as a major cultural and tourist hub for the region.”

The mill built several underpasses to cross the railroad tracks, and they still exist, allowing for pedestrian travel, enhancing the connection potential between the mill, the motel property, and the wilderness surrounding them.

Architectural designer Simeon Bruner, who played a role in the design of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, sees the mill as a “fantastic” example of turn-of-the-century mill architecture, and at about 55,000 square feet, just the right size.

“It’s small enough to make something that is whole, and something that is great,” he said.

Bruner added that this will be a multiyear process before it all comes to fruition. The first phase will be the redesign and construction of the Redwood.

The team is hoping to recapture the exterior charm and feel of the classic American motor court motels of the 1950s and 1960s, but inside, the rooms will be a much more modern experience with views of the river and the mountains.

There will be trails and access to the river for fishing and boating, complete with an open-air shed and a fire pit. Kayaks and canoes will be available, as well as a riverside pool.

The eight-room wing closest to the road will be demolished; the remaining 11-room wing will be completely renovated, and new buildings behind the original structure will increase what is now 19 rooms to about 40 rooms.

The Redwood project cost has been roughly estimated at about \$2.5 million. No estimate has been calculated for the other phases.

The development team has been in talks with Alcombright for more than a year, Svenson said. He said Alcombright has been very welcoming, and an important part of the team by giving them the information they needed to work with the city and state on the use of the riverside property.

As part of the growing project scope, the group is looking at ways to enhance pedestrian circulation between the motel and mill properties and other impactful west end development projects, including Greylock Works and the proposed Global Contemporary Collection and Museum.

Developers are also anxious to bring the planned bike path from North Adams to Williamstown through the trails on the property.

“We’re especially eager to find a bike path solution that involves these properties, adding an additional means of connection,” Stedman said.