



Plainwell paper mill redevelopment project takes next step with tax credits

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By **Sharon Sturdevant** | Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette

PLAINWELL — So far, it's largely been a cleanup operation. Now, the building renovation begins.

With the award last week of nearly \$590,000 in redevelopment tax credits, the last hurdle has been cleared for the first tenant to create office space on the former paper mill site in downtown Plainwell.

"There is nothing stopping this train," said Wayne Bauman, vice president of Conestoga-Rovers & Associates, the private development company working with the city to redevelop the property.



Kalamazoo Gazette File

GAZETTE FILE Work under way: Some buildings will be preserved and others razed as part of the planned redevelopment of the former Plainwell Paper Co. property.

CRA plans to move its regional office to the mill complex, which totals 36 acres.

"There are actually people working in the mill property almost every day," Bauman said. "It's just a lengthy process to get things started."

Bauman and City Manager Erik Wilson point to milestones reached since the city and firm signed a redevelopment partnership agreement last April.

Crews are working to clean up the former Plainwell Paper Co. property and establish plans to decommission — or demolish — mill structures with no historical value or use.

The city has received nearly \$3 million in grants for the project. The money will be used to demolish buildings and renovate Fannie Pell Park to provide additional downtown parking and a pedestrian bridge to access the area where CRA and the city plan to establish offices on the mill property.

Last week, the Michigan Economic Growth Authority granted nearly \$590,000 in brownfield redevelopment tax credits for the project. The city will get \$71,000 of the credits for money it's investing in the Pell park project, while CRA will get the remaining credits for its investments.

"This was the last hurdle stopping CRA from starting to renovate space for its new offices on the mill property," Wilson said.

CRA can move forward with work to install an elevator and complete basic infrastructure upgrades inside the brick office building that faces the Kalamazoo River and the mill race. Once those renovations are completed, CRA plans to move its regional office in Kalamazoo — and at least 30 employees — to the mill site.

Once the \$1.5 million in renovations are completed, Wilson said the firm can formally purchase its new office space and about two acres of land for parking within the mill complex. The closing could happen within the next few months.

CRA also has first option in the next five years to purchase the remaining acreage that has sat vacant since Plainwell Paper declared bankruptcy in November 2000. The city acquired the property in August 2006.

CRA continues to assist city leaders in overseeing plans to demolish unwanted structures on the mill property, monitoring the cleanup process and creating a new main entrance into the mill complex from Pell park.

Here's an overview of current work:

Fannie Pell Park

A number of large trees were removed in January so workers could start building a structure to house utility connections, public restrooms and kayaks. The old water works building will be demolished to make room for additional parking and a circular driveway leading to a new pedestrian bridge into the mill complex. The parking and bridge will link the historic mill buildings to the central business district.

The park project is expected to cost about \$710,000, with \$639,000 funded by grants and the rest paid for by the city, Wilson said.

Razing structures

Some buildings on the mill property will be torn down.

"Some structures have historic value and should be saved, but other structures would be difficult and costly to renovate," Wilson said.

CRA is helping the city evaluate which buildings should be demolished and removed.

The city has \$1.3 million to fund the demolition.

"The city wants to start demolition work this year and thinks it can realistically happen," Wilson said.

Documenting the process

Several groups are pooling resources to document what is involved in revitalizing the mill property.

"Sometimes it's difficult to see points in history where a community changes," Wilson said. "But the demolition and revitalization of the mill property is definitely an exclamation turning point for this city."

The city has retained a firm to capture video images of the structures and interviews with former mill employees. The videos also contain information about how the city decided the revitalized property should include a mixture of residential and commercial uses.

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