



History beckons: Renovation of former Plainwell mill site earns more accolades

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By

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PLAINWELL — There doesn't appear to be much work under way **at the former Plainwell Paper Co.**

The gates are usually locked, weeds grow along the fences and few people regularly move about the property.

But, in reality, **the groundwork to transform the 36-acre site** so it can accommodate business, commercial and residential ventures **continues to gain momentum.**

Consider:

The property soon is expected to be added to the National Register of Historic Places, becoming one of few paper mills in the country to earn the designation that brings access to special grants and tax credits.



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Historic Plainwell Paper Company seen from the Kalamazoo River off North Main Street. City Manager Erik Wilson has won a state-wide award for efforts to preserve the historic property.



City leaders this summer plan to sell an acre of the property to Conestoga-Rovers & Associates, an international developer. It will be the first time in nearly 12 years a private group will own part of the mill and pay taxes on the property.

Conestoga-Rovers & Associates expects to move its national construction headquarters — with more than 30 employees — from Kalamazoo into a

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Plainwell City Manager Erik Wilson looks out from the space in the historic Plainwell Paper mill that will become the new city offices for Plainwell.

renovated section of the complex by October. City leaders will then start planning to move City Hall offices to the complex.

City Manager Erik Wilson won a state award that recognizes efforts to preserve Michigan's history for his role in the redevelopment of the mill property.

"We're getting so close to some really huge and historic moments," Wilson said.

Preserving a landmark

One of those moments is rooted in the past.

"Preserving parts of the Plainwell paper mill complex is critical to telling the story of the paper industry in the Kalamazoo Valley," said Gene Hopkins, a historic preservation architect. "It was not the first paper mill built in the region, but it is the only remaining one that remains relatively intact."

Hopkins and his partner, Tamara Burns, of HopkinsBurns Design Studio in Ann Arbor, helped the city and Conestoga-Rovers & Associates gather information that led the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office to recommend that the National Park Service list the mill — built in phases during the past 130 years — among some of the nation's most treasured cultural resources.

Almost 200 buildings located within the Island and West Bridge historic districts of Plainwell are listed on the registry.

The historic registry listing means the city would qualify for economic incentives to revitalize the property, Wilson said. The designation also will help the city preserve key parts of the landmark, he added.

The paper mill complex is the only one left within the Kalamazoo Valley region, which includes Allegan and Kalamazoo counties and parts of Calhoun County, Hopkins said.

The region was known in the early 1900s as "Paper City" because the abundance of trees and water, coupled with easy access to railroad lines, created a "perfect storm" where the paper industry could thrive, Hopkins said.



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The new handicapped-accessible pedestrian bridge that crosses the mill race will have a snow melt system. The bridge connects Fannie Pell

At one point, Hopkins said, there were 25 mills producing 900 tons of paper a day.

Park to the main entrance of the mill that will house city offices and CRA.

Then people realized how paper production techniques harmed the environment and the industry began to change. Area paper mills were sold to national firms. Many mills were closed and eventually torn down.

“There isn’t much physically left now to tell the story of the paper industry in this region,” Hopkins said.

Mixing old with new

Hopkins said he doesn’t know of any other Michigan paper mills — and only a few across the country — that are listed on National Register of Historic Places. One complex — the Allied Paper Inc. mill in Kalamazoo — was listed on the registry, but the complex was later razed.

Efforts to get the Plainwell mill named a historic site and preserve key sections of the complex will ensure people can still see examples of what paper mills were like from 1887 through 1954 when the paper industry here was booming, Hopkins said.

For example, he said, builders used masonry walls and “slow-burn construction” methods during the early 1900s to make the mill structures as fireproof as possible. They also incorporated heavy timbers and thick floors to support the heavy production equipment and tons of paper. Examples of both are found in the Plainwell mill.

But not every building within the sprawling Plainwell mill site has historic value.

The complex has at least 39 structures that total more than 250,000 square feet of space, Hopkins said. Every building currently located in downtown Plainwell — and then some — could be tucked inside the mill complex.



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Conestoga-Rovers & Associates (CRA) vice president Wayne Bauman stands in the space of building 17 that will be renovated to create

Some of the structures are simply courtyards where workers poured floors and erected roofs to create an enclosed space. Others, like the multistory brick office structure overlooking the Kalamazoo River and the loading-dock space, are expansive areas dipping several stories beneath the surface.

So who gets to decide which buildings are renovated and which structures are demolished?

office space for his company. Plainwell City Manager Erik Wilson is on the left.

"It's almost like an archaeological dig," Hopkins said. "You have to consider what is historically significant and needed to

help tell the paper industry story. You also have look at what is intact enough to preserve and what is economically viable to incorporate in future uses."

The building demolition plan must be approved by historical and environmental agencies.

Current plans call for at least 13 buildings and sections of two other buildings to be saved, Hopkins said.

Workers also will save two historically significant wall sections tucked within the loading-dock structure, even though most of that silver metal building will be knocked down to make room for a park.

Plans are being modified to incorporate the wall sections into the park space in an appropriate way, said Wayne Bauman, vice president of Conestoga-Rovers & Associates, which is working with the city to redevelop the property.

Bauman said the firm hopes to knock down the silver metal building this year and start demolishing other structures in 2012. The city can then sell the scrap metal from the demolition to help finance renovations to move city offices into the mill complex, Bauman said.

City leaders also are developing plans to build a new public safety building on the southwest corner of the complex. That project likely will be funded with a low-interest loan and money set aside from a fire mill tax.

Electrical and mechanical design work is being finished in the area that will house Conestoga-Rovers & Associates employees, who hope to move in by late October.

Bauman said the company plans to create a new main entrance inside the brick office building to greet visitors coming from Fannie Pell Park. A new handicapped-accessible pedestrian bridge was installed across the millrace in May.

Plans also call for a boulevard entrance into the property off Church Street, and Conestoga-Rovers & Associates continues to explore "green energy" options like using the millrace to generate hydroelectricity, Bauman said.

Nearly \$3 million in grants is helping to fund the demolition of structures on the property and renovate Fannie Pell Park to provide additional parking and the pedestrian bridge across the millrace. The mill project also was awarded more than \$600,000 in brownfield redevelopment tax credits.

In addition to the acre it expects to purchase this summer, Conestoga-Rovers & Associates also has first option during the next five years to purchase the remaining 35 acres.

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