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Plainwell paper mill remains in question for redevelopment

There is a possibility that space could be used eventually to create a parking structure."

Instead, Bauman spent some time at the hearing describing how the 33-year-old private firm has tackled numerous Brown-field redevelopment projects since it served as lead environmental consultant for the Love Canal project in Niagara Falls.

The firm has helped redevelop many industrial sites and overseen environmental remediation work at many former paper mill complexes including ones in Vicksburg, Otsego and Allegan. But area resident Mike Jones asked whether CRA has experience redeveloping an industrial site so it has a community focus.

"These proposals show the city and CRA taking over some of the most prime areas on the parcel," Jones said. "Wouldn't it be better to tuck a restaurant or other business into the spaces that look over the river?"

CRA has proposed moving its Kalamazoo office operations into the brick office building since that structure would most easily be updated to meet building codes but the firm might consider later moving its offices elsewhere on the property, Bauman said.

The firm also would consult land use planners before deciding where to situate other specific ventures, Bauman said. Some people questioned how quickly the project might progress and whether green practices — like repairing the hydroelectric generation system

— would be stressed.

Other people, like Gary Sausaman, had questions about how Weyerhaeuser Paper has contracted CRA to assess environmental contamination at the superfund site and then complete the clean-up mandated by a consent agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency that required Weyerhaeuser to escrow some \$6 million for the work.

"What if the city and Weyerhaeuser disagreed on the standard for cleaning up a particular section of the property," Sausaman said. "Do you flip a coin to decide since you work for both groups?" CRA would focus on helping the city and Weyerhaeuser reach a compromise so the clean-up work can proceed, Bauman said.

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Plainwell paper mill remains in question for redevelopment

BY SHARON STURDEVANT

Special to Hometown Gazette

PLAINWELL — Bunny LaDuke had one question as an international developer spoke Tuesday at a public hearing about its plans to help Plainwell officials redevelop the vacant paper mill site.

"The paper company built the really ugly metal building on the front of the property about 45 years ago when I was working there," the Plainwell resident said. "Can't we get rid of that building now?"

LaDuke was among nearly 100 area residents and leaders who attended the June 2 hearing to learn why Conestoga-Rovers and Associates wants to help Plainwell clean up and redevelop the 36-acre parcel that has sat empty for nearly a decade. CRA emerged during a search earlier this year as the leading candidate to help the city clean up the mill property and draw a variety of residential and commercial ventures to the parcel.

"The city and CRA do not have any agreements at this point," city Manager Erik Wilson said. Wilson and other city leaders will sort through public comments made at the hearing and submitted to city hall before deciding whether to sign a letter of intent and start negotiating a developer's agreement with CRA. No decision is expected for several weeks.

"Negotiating that agreement will take some time," Wilson said. "That deal will reinforce the guiding principles and concepts that the city and the developer will follow in this project."

During the hearing, Wilson and CRA Vice President Wayne Bauman repeatedly said that many detailed questions about the project can't be answered yet. Neither man would even guess when LaDuke might see the ugly warehouse building — which currently houses a sand sculpture honoring veterans — knocked down.

"We have actually talked about tearing down that building," Wilson said, "but many people don't know there is a basement underneath it that is as big as that structure."