

Plainwell, CRA work on paper-mill redevelopment

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PLAINWELL — A two-page letter sent this week to Conestoga-Rovers and Associates means city officials want to formally negotiate a partnership to redevelop the vacant paper-mill site.

Negotiating the developer's agreement is expected to take months. It will define timetables for environmental clean up, demolition of unneeded buildings and site redevelopment and will establish occupancy plans, terms for economic development incentives, guidelines to keep some areas open to the public and terms for financial responsibility.

"But all the comments we received after a meeting to introduce CRA to the public were positive," city Man-

ager Erik Wilson said. "The responses indicate people think CRA is the right partner for this project."

The responses came after nearly 100 people attended a June 2 meeting where CRA vice president Wayne Bauman explained why the international development firm wants to help Plainwell clean up and redevelop the 36-acre parcel, which has sat empty for nearly a decade. CRA emerged during a search this year as the leading candidate to help the city clean up the superfund site and then draw a variety of residential and commercial ventures to the parcel.

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

City council members agreed June

6 that Wilson could sent the letter of intent to start negotiations with CRA. During that discussion, council members reaffirmed their interest in an offer by CRA to start demolishing unneeded structures and renovating the main brick office building to create office space for its staff and city hall as soon as a formal agreement is signed.

A few people voiced concerns during the June 2 meeting about using "prime space" within the complex to create office space for CRA and city hall.

"Moving city hall into that mill sends a powerful message that we will not let this project die," Wilson said. "It communicates that this is not the end of the mill project but rather the beginning."

Moving city hall into the mill complex also would ensure that portions

of the historic complex would remain accessible to area residents, Wilson said.

"I agree that is one of the greatest reasons to move city hall into the mill complex," council member Todd Overhuel said.

"Citizens will want to go up there and look around that space." But the move would also provide more space for city employees whose offices currently are situated in "closets," council member Ray Fuller said. Allowing CRA to move some 30 staff members from its Kalamazoo office into the mill complex will bring jobs into the city, Wilson said.

"And the city will for the first time, in nearly a decade, capture tax dollars from the property," he said. "We really need taxable value at the mill to offset other economic conditions."