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Big plans loom at old knitting mill

Unique partnership promises new life for derelict building

BY MEREDITH MACLEOD

A vacant former knitting mill in Hamilton's poorest neighbourhood is the first purchase of a unique partnership between the city and a private equity company.

Hamilton Realty Capital Corporation bought the Cannon Knitting Mills at Mary and Cannon streets in the Beasley neighbourhood for an undisclosed price in January. Environmental assessments and rezoning applications are under way as the developer and a team led by local architect David Premi determine the best and most feasible uses for the property.

Those possibilities include residential, retail, office space, artists' studios, museum space, a post-secondary campus or maybe a mix of all of that.

The 110,000-square-foot building is a complex of about five structures built between 1854 and 1950. It had been up for sale for \$800,000 for a number of years, and while several investors from Toronto came to take a look, for various reasons — the scale and condition of the building, potential environmental problems, the nearby Good Shepherd building, the traffic hurtling by on Cannon — they all shied away.

The owners of the mill, L & S Realty, hinted that taxes, insurance and utilities might leave them no choice but demolition, says Glen Norton, acting manager of the city's downtown renewal division and manager of HRCC.

"We urged them not to do that and quite rightly they said, 'Put your money where your mouth is.'"

HRCC, which is backed by Forum Equity Partners, a Toronto-based private real estate developer,

wanted to keep the purchase quiet until they had a plan worked out for the building's future, but the deal hit Hamilton news blog Raise the Hammer this week.

"We want this to be a catalyst ... but we have to find the right solution," said Norton. "We are starting to look at ... what makes sense for the community, what can we afford to do?"

Paul Sousa, chair of the Beasley Neighbourhood Association, says the knitting mill is critical to the area and there were fears that the building could be lost, perhaps to neglect or to fire, but "I was confident somebody would recognize the jewel that it is."

Now he dreams of a restaurant with a patio looking over the adjacent Beasley park, shops and mixed rent housing. The massive, three-storey structure is dotted with broken windows and littered with pigeon droppings inside. Water damage has caused the wood floors to buckle and paint flakes to fall from the wooden ceiling.

But the space inside is enormous, well lit and wide open — perfect for urban condos or office space — broken only by thick Douglas fir posts.

The imprints of knitting looms are still visible in the worn floors upstairs. There are numerous wood freight elevators and those rolling steel fire doors so prized in retrofitted buildings.

Everywhere he looks, Norton sees opportunity. A boiler room surrounded by thick brick walls and concrete floors is the perfect spot for a microbrewery featuring a tasting room and sandwich bar.

The most impressive part is a long atrium-type space down the centre of the structure. It was once



PHOTOS BY LORNE CHESAL, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Hamilton photographer and Beasley resident Lorne Chesal plans to document the transformation of the Cannon Knitting Mills. His photos can be seen at passionateaboutpictures.com/seepix/galleries/ckm/.

the area where fabric was dyed. It's almost churchlike with wood beams criss-crossing the soaring ceiling and windows circling the roofline.

Whatever the end use is, it has to be viable, says Norton. The city lent HRCC \$2 million from the Future Fund to get started and Forum is not in the game to lose money.

HRCC, which aims to leverage \$40 million of investment downtown, is entirely owned by Forum president Richard Abboud. Yet while the city has no stake in the company, it gets 50 per cent of the vote on projects to tackle. Abboud is reluctant to offer timelines or the level of investment the project will entail. He's never ventured into a restoration before, usually partnering with municipalities and governments to build court houses, detention centres, arts venues, mixed use housing, schools and public buildings.

Forum's most recent project is a \$225 million town centre in Or-

leans, Ont., featuring an arts and cultural centre, a hotel, office buildings, retail and commercial space, a seniors' home, housing and green space. Abboud says his company is "bullish on Hamilton", especially if light-rail transit and all-day GO trains materialize.

Little is known about the history of the mills, says architect Premi. There is legend that the oldest part of the building was once a hotel. Over the years, Cannon Knitting made hosiery, school curtains, bedding for hotels and milled cotton into bolts.

"This was the economic engine at one time of this neighbourhood," he said. "It was a provider for Beasley and beyond. The whole idea of transforming it back to something that can act as an economic engine and restore its purpose is exciting and meaningful."

Premi says the community will have plenty of say in what happens with the building. At a recent design workshop, neighbours



The exterior of the cotton mill has seen better days.

thought it should include retail, a coffee shop, perhaps a community kitchen or arts school.

Neighbour Bob Ralph, who owns an immaculate two-storey stone house across the street, just a year or two younger than the knitting mill, is thrilled to learn there are plans to revive the building.

"This city is a jewel. People don't see that, but I see how the city is moving forward," said Ralph.

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