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**C.E.D. PROJECT
FINAL REPORT**

**REDEVELOPMENT of AL-GOR SHOE MILL
ROCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE**

**Applied Thesis
Master of Science Degree**

**National Community Economic Development Program
New Hampshire College
Graduate School of Business**

Submitted By:

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A man's value to the community depends primarily on how far his feelings, thoughts, and actions are directed toward promoting the good of his fellows.

Albert Einstein

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INTRODUCTION and a BRIEF HISTORY

Rochester, New Hampshire is a small city of about 30,000 residents. It is located on the east border of New Hampshire, abutting Lebanon, Maine. Rochester is approximately 100 miles due north of Boston, Massachusetts.

In years past, the driving forces of Rochester have included industries of shoe and leather production, agriculture, and services. Many of the commercial interests have moved to climates friendlier in temperature and labor. Others have simply folded.

In the wake of one such move, The Al-Gor Shoe company closed its doors around 1984. Left behind is a large, abandoned shoe mill on a parcel of about 6.5 acres. The mill buildings house about 80,000 square feet of covered space, rising two to five stories. It is one of the most prominent buildings in the city. The mill is located at the intersections of Routes 108 and 125, both major carriage ways into the city. When approaching downtown Rochester from either the nearby turnpike or from the airport, the building looms into sight, heralding a gateway of the city proper.

The mill is currently neglected. Broken glass, boarded windows, trash, overgrown brambles and scrub are the architectural and landscaping details that are most noticed. Closer inspection reveals an interesting complex of "four and five story Italianate style industrial buildings erected between circa 1854 and 1880." ¹

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

This building, like others, in the downtown section of Rochester is abandoned. The site has become an eyesore and is increasingly dangerous as vandalism to the buildings continues. With the building unoccupied, deterioration accelerates as maintenance is neglected. Minor roof leaks and a few broken windows have given way to major leaks and many windows broken.

At the same time as this building is withering, the list of people in the city who need low cost housing are increasing. The waiting list for elderly housing in Rochester is over 12 months long. Given the poor economy in the region, more and more families are having difficulty making market rate rent and mortgage payments. Housing for the handicapped is and will always be a need, too.

Another aspect of the problem is that due to the sagging economy, building trades jobs are virtually non-existent. This downturn has occurred just at the time of the completion and opening of Rochester's new Vocational-Technical high school. The students in the many trades programs at the school currently face bleak prospects upon graduating. Many construction jobs have been lost in the past two years. Some estimates are as high as 20,000 construction jobs lost. A pressing concern of graduating students is trying to find employment in the trade that they have trained in. Given that there are many experienced construction workers seeking employment, it is increasingly difficult for a young person fresh out of high school to find work in these areas.

PROJECT GOALS

The primary goal of this project was to obtain development rights of the Al-Gor Shoe Mill in Rochester, New Hampshire.

Secondary goals included utilizing the mill buildings and creating affordable housing and commercial space.

Other secondary goals were to provide an avenue for local vocational students in the building trades to ply their knowledge and newly learned skills via employment in the renovation of the mill buildings, and to provide other construction jobs also on the site.

These goals would address at least a portion of the defined problems. The mill would again be occupied, thereby reducing the opportunities for vandalism. Housing would be created, expanding the options of the elderly, handicapped, and other persons and families needing affordable housing. Commercial space would be created, giving small businesses and other ventures a place where affordable rents would help them get started.

In utilizing this mill, it would remove a source of urban blight and would become a model of community activity and community economic development. As a gateway to the city, the renovated mill would demonstrate the industriousness of the area and would be a proud symbol for all those who participated in the process.

METHODS

To start the project, I took a look at the downtown of the city and noted what was immediately viewed. From the major roads and from the downtown, the mill buildings dominate the skyline. From four blocks away, the building is imposing and the architecture is interesting.

From two blocks away, the blight becomes apparent and the aesthetic entities fade into the background.

Up close, on site, the buildings and the grounds look to be a disaster. The neglect lingers in the air. There seems to be too much to do.

I conducted an informal survey of area residents, friends, and some business people about the mill. I had no prepared questions. Instead, while chatting, I asked them their impressions of the site and what should be done about it. Some people declared that the city ought to buy the building and fix it up into apartments. Another suggested that the federal government buy it and put it on the register of historic places. Still others said it ought to be condemned and knocked down.

Soon after I had made the initial queries, I called the realtor listed on the sign in front of the site. We set up a meeting and toured the buildings and the grounds.

During this tour, it became obvious that there was years of work to be done. Similarly, there was unlimited potential. The structure seemed solid and the damage from the elements repairable.

Having been involved in the building trades for over fifteen years, I knew intuitively that the project was possible and feasible. What I saw encouraged me to the extent that I knew by utilizing modern construction techniques, the buildings could be initially converted into buildable space.

That is, I knew that a concrete slab could be poured atop each existing floor to create new structural components. Also, the roof could be patched, the grounds cleaned up, and an appearance of integrity would begin to emerge. The building could be divided into the housing, commercial, and civic spaces. Once these major components had been addressed, construction of the apartments and commercial spaces could begin. Each floor has very high ceilings where utilities and other services could be run.

The one stumbling block that caused me to doubt the entire project was the concern about toxic waste on site. This first became apparent while touring the parcel with the realtor when we viewed a pile of rubbery chunks -- possible grindings, trimmings, etc. from the shoe making process. The realtor, Mr. G. Brandt Atkins, was unsure of the content of the material. We arrived at the conclusion that an outside individual, capable of identifying the debris or analysis of it, would be necessary when considering the handling and disposal of the pile. It was then that alarms began to nag me in my mind. What other by-products of the shoe making process might be in the area or under the scrub grass and gravel?

After I met with the realtor and viewed the site, I made an appointment with the Director of Planning for Rochester, Mr. Peer Kraft-Lund. He and I met to discuss the overall history of the mill and to explore any city money that might become available.

Mr. Kraft-Lund applauded the efforts and concepts of converting the mill into a mixed use of affordable housing and commercial space. Money available could be some Community Development Block Grant funds (CDBG), especially for housing if a group wanted to start a housing cooperative in the mill. The single largest stumbling block, in Mr. Kraft-Lund's view, was that the owners of the mill wanted a prohibitive amount of money to purchase or lease the site.

The economy was and still is in the midst of a serious decline. Area banks were and are struggling with many problems, including their own imminent collapse. This was not the best of times to be leveraging vast sums of money on such a project.

Mr. Kraft-Lund invited me to attend the City of Rochester's 1991 Living Master Plan subcommittees to gather impressions from residents as to what could be done with the site.

For the next four months, I attended meetings with the sub committees for both economic development and housing. These met one or two evenings per month and I was able to meet with a variety of individuals and listen to a myriad of concerns and ideas.

I never met with any person who was not in favor of seeing the mill utilized in some way. Often I would work into the subject by asking the people what they thought should be done, as opposed to opening up our discussions by telling them what I thought. Not surprisingly, the ideas for the mill closely mirrored those of my first informal surveys. Some wanted to see affordable housing, others liked the idea of businesses, others wanted to see it torn down. They all wanted to see something done, instead of having to watch it sink further into disrepair.

Some of the concerns raised were the deterioration of the site and the awful impression the broken windows of the mill transferred to the city as a whole. At least three persons mentioned the unknown dumping on the site that probably occurred when the mill was in operation.

Two older gentlemen remember earlier times when industry would bring barrels of wastes to the far end of their areas and dispose of them simply by pouring them out. This was a common way to handle wastes: there was not the awareness nor the concern for the environment as machinery began making inroads during the 1800's through the very recent past. " ...it simply happened that ecological understanding was poorly developed during formative periods of industrial technology and the cities it spawned." ²

These men could not be certain that such dumping was done at this shoe mill. On the other hand, they couldn't see many reasons why it wouldn't have been done. One man mentioned that might have been the use of the large field behind the mill.

I had a meeting with the realtor and the Director of Economic Development for the city of Rochester, Mr. George Bald. Mr. Bald also applauded the use of the mill. He, too, had concerns about the purchase price and lease price of the mill, stating that other mills in nearby towns had been successfully converted only to collapse from a lack of tenants.

When asked about the toxic waste issue, Mr. Bald noted that clean up was the responsibility of the property owner. He remembered that an initial EPA assessment of the site had been conducted. The result of that report was that further investigation needed to be done on the site. There was no way at this time that the current owners could be mandated to do that study. Mr Bald also commented that the existing EPA Superfund, set up to reclaim contaminated sites, was already over budget on existing projects and probably would not be able to offer funding for this site.

After careful consideration and review of the information and impressions that I had gathered, I chose not to take the next step and approach the vocational school about the project. I felt that I would be doing an injustice about presenting such a project if I was unsure about both financing and potential liability for what was under the ground.

RESULTS

I chose to curtail further approaches about the mill. Given the existing failure of local banks and the unknown toxic waste problem, I felt that I would be wasting people's time if I kept on as I was going.

In this, I was not able to fulfill my primary goal of obtaining the development rights to the mill by the end of 1991. Subsequently, because the primary goal was not realized, the secondary goals also were not realized.

I was able to approach the problem, set up a logical framework, seek public opinion, and then make a decision as to whether or not I should continue with the project. It is only the lack of funding and the potential toxic waste problem that have kept me from continuing. If I was certain that there was not a toxic waste liability and had it in writing from the EPA, then I would begin a funding campaign to buy the mill.

As it sits now, the purchase price of the mill is approximately \$1.8 Million; Lease price is approximately \$90,000.00 per year. In the region's existing economic debacle, such funding for a real estate venture, no matter how noble the project, would be almost impossible.

The above figures are just the prices to obtain use of the building. There are still the engineering fees, taxes, construction costs, marketing, insurance, utilities, and so on to be covered. The conversion of the mill project could run between \$5 to \$55 million. Very expensive for affordable housing. There are simply too many unknowns about the building and the site. The issues of funding and potential toxic wastes have doomed this project at this time.

CONCLUSIONS

Much information was obtained simply by asking people familiar with the site what they thought should be done with it. In this informal manner, it is possible to get a preliminary impression of public thought. Success for such a project would depend upon the public's input, insight, and support. "Planners and planning today is a process that must operate on the local level." ³

Similarly, formal research must be conducted to insure that the intuitive reaction to a project can be supported in other ways. Simply stating that a particular site, in this case the mill, would be a good place for elderly housing is not enough. Rather, it is necessary to determine why it is a good site.

The very best reason for utilizing the mill is that it is very accessible by transportation and services. The location is great. "Neighborhood services, like neighborhood quality, may affect the well-being of older people, since with increasing age people become more dependent on nearby facilities and services." ⁴

The mill is situated less than 3/4 mile from Frisbee Hospital, a recently upgraded modern hospital. The fire and police stations are less than 3/4 mile in the opposite direction.

Diagonally across the street is a well maintained and landscaped commons that features many seating areas and a perimeter walking path with wooden fence which can act as a handrail. "In a city, public parks are like breathing places. Parks are for those who live in buildings; they are for out-of-doors rest and pleasure, family picnics, and enjoying the flowers and trees. As a means of making itself a good place in which to live, a city should offer public parks." ⁵

On the other side of the park is a grocery store. Within walking distance is a brand new super-pharmacy.

The building is also on a public transportation route, and the site is serviced by all utilities. This location is central to many services and amenities. Location is one of the most important features in establishing elderly housing. "In developing housing for the elderly, planners should attend initially to project location, and then should decide on design and operating features." ⁶

As this site is conveniently located, it is also rich with history and interesting architecture. It is important to retain historic buildings. They "should not be considered an impediment to progress," but rather as "assets that make people want to live in New Hampshire." ⁷

Because this mill is link to the past, it is not merely "something that has happened; it is something that is happening. History is a process that defines the communities we live in today. It is not only our present 'landmarks' -- our churches, town halls, covered bridges and libraries -- but our downtown commercial blocks, old mill buildings, and corner stores." ⁸

If this mill complex is torn down to make way for some other type of development, the city will lose a link to the past. Such razing of character and history will be a disservice to future generations. Letting the building go to ruin while holding out for maximum gain which may never materialize also puts an aesthetic burden on the area and harms the overall impression of the city. "A need has been demonstrated to continually assess and interpret urban design opportunities." ⁹

A positive reaction to saving and redeveloping a cornerstone of the city is not an uncommon occurrence among people. "Towns and cities [and their inhabitants] are increasingly recognizing that the preservation of their downtown is vital to preserving their heritage. In our rush to modernize, we have forgotten the fundamental truth that people need a central meeting place. The old downtown served that function once. Nothing has ever replaced that crucial foundation in those places where they destroyed their downtowns. The solution to forge and maintain a special sense of community starts downtown." ¹⁰

The redevelopment of a large historic building can result in a vibrant hub that serves people, houses people, beckons people and informs people. A seemingly albatross of a structure can be transformed into the most delightful of places, rich with culture, communication, and commerce.

As an example: "When developer James Rouse decided to make a downtown retail center from a set of rehabilitated market buildings in 1973, people thought he had lost his mind. Rouse had an idea that these buildings could be a focus point for Boston, Massachusetts. He pictured such a complex and it was named Faneuil Hall Market Place - a center for retail, entertainment, and social activity that had all but ceased to exist downtown." ¹¹

Another example: The redeveloped mills in the National Park at Lowell Massachusetts is a transformation of dilapidated industrial sprawl to thriving tourist, education, housing, and retail enterprises. The grounds are now patrolled by Park Rangers. It is a clean, well run area; entrepreneurial spirit permeates the environment, even on a rainy day.

This is not to say that this project would be as grandiose as either Faneuil Hall or the Lowell Mill Park. However, imagine these very large mill buildings, shaped like an el, converted to a wing of dedicated affordable apartments and a wing of commerce and suites.

Further consider that there would be a swimming pool (the city hasn't a local inside pool), fitness area, conference space, art gallery, mill and high-tech museum, accessible to all.

There is plenty of parking space and the back field could give way to a medium sized Hilton Hotel.

The bottom two floors of the commercial wing could be divided lengthwise. The side facing the street would be opened up to expose two stories of windows blanketing this enclosed pedestrian mall into an enormous sun room. The second floor would be a mezzanine open to the lower level. The intersection of the two building wings would be enlarged towards the back of the lot, creating a rotunda that could span all levels of the buildings, serviced by stairs and elevators.

On the two upper floors of the commercial wing, offices, storage, and more apartments are possible. A restaurant on the very top floor would have a commanding view.

There is space for adult and child day care and activity area. There is room for a post-office substation and a permanent city hall annex. Space is available for start-up ventures and for existing retail entities.

Filling the buildings would not be the issue. Rather, the issue is funding the project to make the space useable by tenants both residential and commercial.

Says Edward Blakey in Planning Local Economic Development: "Land cost is a critical determinant in whether or not good affordable housing can be provided." ¹² The owners of the building want at least \$1.5 to 1.8 Million (U.S.) just to purchase the property. This is a large sum, and it is only just the first sum. "Complexes do not come cheap." ¹³

If the housing is to be affordable, it will have to be developed with community good, not profit, in mind. The commercial aspects of the redeveloped mill would have to help support the housing. The city itself could raise money through bonds, but only with an overwhelming majority of tax payer support.

Given the existing tax structure of New Hampshire where property owners bear the burden of operating the local, county, and state governments, (no income or sales tax in NH) the addition of a long-term bond supported by long-term taxes will not be easy to convince the populace to vote for. Development of this scale and payment by bonding is particularly difficult for a small city like Rochester. "The very size of the population is a factor -- raising the question as to whether or not small and mid-sized cities are suitable to the benefits of the urban marketplace." ¹⁴

On the other hand, the city very possibly cannot afford not to do the project. With a very complex array of funding, stemming from Federal monies through the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), to local bonds, to tenant payments, the redeveloped mills could be a success.

Profit is not the motive. "Said one civic leader regarding their revitalized downtown marketplace, 'we did not make the investment with the idea of it being a monetary return. We did it to increase the life of downtown.'" ¹⁵

It must be agreed that the downtown section of a city or town should not be left to die. If necessary, public development should be done to create a place that draws people to it. This development must be done full spectrum. That is, everything from services to housing must be addressed and available.

"In the past decades, downtowns from coast to coast have virtually rebuilt with new offices, restaurants, hotels, department stores, specialty shops, and cultural facilities. Yet some of these same downtowns are virtual ghost towns when the workday is over. These downtowns still lack a critical ingredient for any center city: a varied supply of housing in all price ranges." ¹⁶

"People are the lifeblood of any great city. If more people lived downtown, the streets would no longer be strangely empty on the weekday evenings and the weekends. If developers and civic leaders want to create exciting downtowns, they cannot just build more housing and hope for the best." ¹⁷

Mr. Gregory Serrao, in a recent issue of the Journal of Housing, lists three factors of a successful urban housing development:

1. Architectural design and layout must offer a pleasing, secure environment at all times.
2. Each building must engage the street: the whole is greater than the individual buildings. Make pedestrians comfortable. The ground level space should be devoted to retail spaces for everyday neighborhood services, to include day care, van pools, bus stop, supermarket, and so forth.
3. Affordable rents. Higher rents will only mean excessive vacancies. ¹⁸

"To require full market payment for housing would strike a blow against young families, pensioners, large families, and all low income categories of the population." ¹⁹

Utilizing and redeveloping this mill will require massive funding which will have to be raised from many sources. The choreography of a project of this size will be difficult and will take many years.

The return on investment, must be considered over many, many generations. "[Concerning redevelopment]...nor is everything simple from an economic point of view. Housing is a durable commodity. Under normal conditions, it should last 100 - 150 years."²⁰

"The government sector, like the business sector, can justify creating debt in terms of its increasing stock of real assets -- its dams, roads, schools, housing projects, and the like." ²¹

This mill could become a cultural cornerstone for the City of Rochester in the coming century. As the age of the population spirals up, and it will continue for 30 - 50 more years as people live longer and the median age increases, it will be good to see dedicated housing for the elderly and for the disadvantaged. It will be a symbol of the growing need to care for our elders and others in society, along with maintaining the architecture that is our history. It will herald to coming generations a linkage to the past and to the future. It will show that we as a city, in planning the future, understood the existing issues and acted on them.

If the mill can be brought back to life with the help of students from the local high school, then these students' children will be able to point to the buildings and say, "my mom, dad, uncle, aunt, cousin, etc. helped make that place into what it is now."

"Housing is rarely considered by most cities with regard to economic development."²² Through the creation of dedicated affordable housing space, there becomes the need and the opportunity to do more. "Local economic development is creating local wealth via mobilizing and effectively utilizing local resources and potentials. A key issue is the need to diversify: to create new jobs through production of new, competitive goods and services."²³

"The old intra-urban theory was about optimizing some combination of living, working, and consuming. This still holds true today. A dogged belief that industrial development as the key to revitalizing an area has resulted in miles of habitable housing and related facilities being mindlessly demolished."²⁴

The mill can become a lovely set of affordable and market rate apartments. Amenities include: security, location, physical fitness opportunities, day care for all ages, civic areas, mill and high tech museum, art gallery, ample parking, visitor information center, public transportation, and a myriad of consumer retail goods and services. "The approaches communities use to provide services while reducing costs and creating jobs is bound only by the imagination."²⁵

In concluding, this mill in Rochester, New Hampshire has unlimited potential and can be an asset of the city for centuries. We will always need housing for the elderly and disadvantaged, as well as market rate rents. We will also need culture, history, and a sense of community. Those who will work on the mill to create these ideas into reality will have a product that they and their families will be proud of. We will always need examples of redevelopment that create housing and jobs, as well as being a catalyst to reawaken the downtown.

In these very difficult times, it will take bold leadership and a long term commitment from the city to make it possible. In one sense, it can be viewed of as a latter day Works Progress Administration project (WPA), whereby the government finds and invests the funds to create jobs that in turn create a public good. Again, Mr. Blakey: "Municipal fiscal policy of 'we won't do it unless we have the money' is no longer acceptable."²⁶

ENDNOTES

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