

Globe North

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CHELSEA

Lofty ideas on drawing board



PHOTO/COURTESY DAVIS DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

Since 1968, the former lithograph factory has been used for offices, manufacturing, and storage space.

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A former Chelsea printing factory will be converted into an environmentally innovative condominium development that includes artist-style lofts, solar panels, canals, and possibly a fleet of shared cars.

A Somerville firm last December acquired the 17.5-acre site, formerly the home of the Forbes Lithograph Co., and has secured the permits needed to undertake the first phase of its mixed-use development.

City officials are welcoming the project, which the firm refers to as the Forbes Park Redevelopment, as another sign of the city's rejuvenation.

"This is going to be a model project," said District Three City Councilor David Cleveland, who lives nearby. "It's going to be something people from around the country will come to look at. It's going to be that spectacular."

City Manager Jay Ash said Chelsea has a campaign to address properties that present residential-industrial conflicts.

CHELSEA, Page 6

► CHELSEA

Continued from Page 1

"This industrial property's only access point is through a residential neighborhood," he said. "For generations, trucks have driven through the Mill Hill neighborhood to access the property. So, in order to resolve the conflict, we've looked at the property as being a potential residential development."

Ash said the project also will help the city achieve its goal of having 1,200 new housing units built over the next three years.

Following other similar projects, such as the conversion of a former textile building on nearby Spencer Avenue to a 100-unit condominium complex, he said, "This is going to continue the momentum to generate additional interest and investment in the community."

The Forbes property is bordered on the north by MBTA commuter rail tracks and Crescent Avenue, to the east by Mill Creek, and to the south and west by the Chelsea River and other wetlands.

The Forbes Lithograph Co. operated a printing plant on the site, located off Forbes Avenue in the city's lower Broadway section, from 1886 until 1968. The firm made wrappers, labels, and — during World War II — "invasion money" for the US government. Invasion money, or "military currency," was used by the United States as currency in areas occupied by American forces.

Since 1968, the property has been used as an industrial park and rented for offices, manufacturing, and storage space.

The Somerville firm, Davis De-



PHOTO/COURTESY DAVIS DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

A 17.5-acre site slated for redevelopment adjacent to the Chelsea River was once home to a printing factory.

signs/Development, took an interest in the property about two years ago, according to James Bill, a project manager for the company.

"We immediately realized its potential because of its location," Bill said. Noting that water and railroad tracks frame its borders, he said, "It has this really inviting sense of community. We saw it as an opportunity to develop a new creative, mixed-use community."

The company is also high on Chelsea, said Bill, who moved to the city a year ago. He lives in a three-family home he is fixing up on the waterfront.

"It's a community of longtime residents and newcomers who are equally excited about the direction Chelsea is going in," he said.

The Chelsea development will

be similar to an ongoing project the firm is undertaking to convert the former M.W. Carr factory in Somerville to a mixed-use development of 75 live-work lofts and commercial space.

The Chelsea project calls for a complex of 225 market-rate live-work lofts and about 20,000 square feet of retail space. Prices have not yet been announced.

The company intends to use the nine original factory buildings in the complex, restoring the brick exterior and removing some interior walls to create more open space. Plans call for housing to be located on the upper floors, and retail on the ground floors.

"What we want to foster is this sense of place," Bill said, with such businesses as a restaurant, a bak-

ery, and a cafe.

As with the Somerville project, a distinct aspect of the Chelsea project will be environmentally friendly features.

Those would include the placement of solar heating cells on the roof, and "passive solar" techniques, such as large south-facing windows to absorb sunrays. The company also plans to recycle storm water collected on site.

Bill said that apart from its ecological benefits, such features are a good marketing tool since there are consumers who would like to live in buildings with "green" systems.

Davis also wants to incorporate features that will minimize the number of vehicles on the site.

The company is exploring the purchase of a fleet of cars that would be shared by residents of the complex. It has also had preliminary discussions with the MBTA about reviving a commuter rail stop that once existed at the site. In addition, it plans to replace the bridge over the railroad tracks with a bridge that will accommodate pedestrians as well as cars.

Other features would include a river walk along Mill Creek and the Chelsea River. And the company plans to raze three buildings built in later years to connect the factory buildings and replace them with canals.

Davis has received permits for the first two phases of the project, which call for construction of 140 lofts and the bridge replacement. It hopes to have those lofts ready for occupancy by the fall of 2006. The final phase will include development of the remaining lofts, the retail spaces, and the river walk.