

# Old factory keeps time with trends

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Photo by File Photo  
Waltham Watch Factory

By Nicole Haley/Daily News staff  
GHS  
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Waltham -

In the more than 150 years since it was built along the Charles River, the Waltham Watch Factory on Crescent Street has seen plenty of changes in the city around it.

And soon the historic building will be making some changes of its own.

Owners of the factory site met with local officials and residents last night and presented plans to develop apartments, office space, a restaurant and cafe.

The owners assured neighbors the building's exterior would not be altered, but would be restored to more closely resemble its original facade.

"These are buildings that have had a lot of life registered through them as changes have occurred," said Henry Moss, an architect on the development team.

Two years ago representatives from First Republic said they wanted to build a 122-room hotel at the site. Since then, the company joined forces with Boston-based Berkeley Investments, Inc. to form Watch City Ventures LLC.

The new partnership altered the original development by replacing hotel rooms with 95 apartments. The 177,000 square feet of office space, restaurant, and cafe were all in the original plans.

"This is a fantastic property and we're very excited about working on it," said Eric Ekman, project manager for Berkeley Investments.

Addressing a room full of listeners and surrounded by display boards in a makeshift meeting room at the Watch Factory, Ekman called the endeavor a "historical rehabilitation."

Ekman said the project will progress in phases, the first of which will include the office space and restaurant. Ekman said the group intends to start construction on phase one by November and have it completed within a year.

From an architectural standpoint, the building configurations with views of the river on one side and windows looking onto open rectangular courtyards on the other make for an appealing work environment, Moss said.

"These buildings used to be entered directly from Crescent Street and we're going to re-establish that," Moss said, adding the fence around the property would be taken down to make the building more inviting.

Ekman said he is talking to companies interested in the office space and one restaurant, though he would not disclose details.

Starting in the 1850s, the Waltham Watch Factory became the first company to manufacture interchangeable watch parts, creating the concept of precision engineering. The factory shut down in the 1950s but Waltham still owes its Watch City nickname to the building.

Moss said the redeveloped building would include an area open to the public where Waltham Watch Factory artifacts would be displayed.

The second phase of the project would be the apartments, which Ekman said requires a special permit from the city. The owners already have 600 spaces of surface parking including lots on Brown and Cherry streets.

To be good neighbors to the river, Ekman said the developers have partnered with the Charles River Watershed Association to implement "low impact" development practices.

The developers said they might consider a parking garage as well, but not until the first two phases are completed.

Crescent Street resident Jane Radzvin used to work in the Watch Factory when high-tech firm Panametrics occupied one of the buildings. In general, Radzvin said she liked the idea of development that would "improve the city of Waltham" but she was worried the new apartments might cause landlords to hike up rents in the area.

Senior project manager Peter Reed tried to assuage residents' worries about traffic, saying the impact would probably be less than what Panametrics generated during its height of operation. Cars would also be able to enter and exit the buildings from multiple streets.

Mayor Jeanette A. McCarthy said she liked the apartments better than the hotel concept because it would probably generate fewer car trips. She also liked the developers' concept to keep the buildings outside unchanged and their promise to enhance the riverwalk along the back of the property, which will remain open to the public.

Ekman said the developers are talking about upgrading the playground and wading pool across the street by the Fitch School.

Ward 8 City Councilor Stephen F. Rourke assured the crowd there would be more opportunities for public comment as the project moves forward. The developers will have to come before the council for at least one special permit for the residential use.