

Timely developments



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By Nicole Haley/Daily News staff
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Waltham -

Decades ago Arthur Harrison took his family skating on the coves of the Charles River.

Every time he drove into Waltham from his Auburndale home the large brick factory on Rumford Avenue caught his eye as he passed by it.

"I have been interested in the building on Rumford Avenue since I was a young man in my 30s," Harrison says. "I always hoped that someone would preserve it - to me it's a magnificent example of the heritage of this community."

Harrison, the project manager with the development team Norumbega/Oaktree LLC, hopes to break ground by October on a condominium project four years in the making. The development will convert the former O'Hara Waltham Dial Co., built in 1893, into 34 units of housing - three of them in the factory space itself and 31 in a new matching brick building.

"The street face we are preserving will reflect this historic building as you may have seen it in the late 1800s," Harrison said.

As Harrison's project picks up momentum, residents are keeping their eyes on the historic Waltham Watch Factory on Crescent Street, where another development team plans to erect apartments, office space, a restaurant, and a cafe. The first phase of that project is expected to get under way in November.

Both developers discussed the historic buildings and the challenges of bringing more than century-old buildings into modern use while maintaining the historic integrity of city landmarks.

Watch City

The story behind Waltham's "Watch City" nickname lies in the walls of these factories. In 1854 the Waltham Watch Co. was founded at the massive brick factory along the Charles River on Crescent Street. The company became the first watch manufacturer in the world to mass produce complete watches, assembling "interchangeable" parts in one location.

The factory closed down in 1954.

The renovated Waltham Watch Factory will feature a public display of watches, watchmaking machines and historical

images from the 19th century.

"The rehabilitation effort will entail extensive repair work to the buildings that will serve to preserve the historic landmark for many more generations to come," says Eric Ekman, project manager for Berkeley Investments, which partnered with First Republic for the project to form Watch City Ventures LLC.

The developers plan to build 95 apartments, 177,000 square feet of office space, a restaurant and a cafe. At the same time, they are working to restore the factory's original facade and open up access to the public. The renovations, however, will not be easy.

"The Watch Factory is characterized by a series of narrow wings averaging 24 feet wide with regimented rows of windows designed to maximize daylighting for the production and assembly of watches," Ekman explained.

While the design "offers unparalleled natural light", Ekman said it also presents design challenges. In total, the complex has 5,700 windows.

Henry Moss, of Bruner/Cott & Associates, the project architects, said the development will open up the complex by re-establishing entries in the buildings facing Crescent Street while the "existing deteriorated concrete walkways and unattractive side entries will be removed."

Mayor Jeannette A. McCarthy said she liked how the Watch Factory developers are including public access to the historic building into the design through improvements to the Riverwalk behind the property, making the historical display and also opening up the courtyards between the connected buildings.

"Whether it be public or private, I think it's good to renovate these buildings - it shows the architecture of the past, the quality of the workmanship, and the history of Waltham," McCarthy said.

Over on Rumford Avenue, the old O'Hara Waltham Dial Co., is also rooted in history and presented development challenges.

Cleaning up an eyesore

Fenced off with danger signs and boarded windows, the vacant factory has become an eyesore in Waltham's Island neighborhood. Harrison's company started working on the project in 2003 and first applied for zoning variances in 2004.

However, unexpected challenges and an uncooperative economy halted the project from moving forward. Last week the Zoning Board of Appeals renewed the developer's permission to build by granting several minor zoning variances.

Harrison said the renovation into condominiums, dubbed Island Residences, would maintain the original facade of the old factory which manufactured watch dials from 1893 to about the early 1950s. At that time, the factory evolved to fine porcelain work with ornamental plates and campaign buttons, according to Harrison.

"My primary interest is history and historic preservation," Harrison said.

The factory's historical use deposited decades worth of paint waste, which meant extensive environmental cleanup efforts for the developers. The property also contains a part of Cram's Cove and so Harrison had to work closely with the Waltham Conservation Commission. But Harrison says seeing the historic building renovated will make all the challenges worthwhile.

"It was a very long process," Harrison said.

Al Arena, director of the Waltham Museum, can recite the history of every landmark building in the city. Arena believes developers who touch historic landmarks in the city should make "a significant part of the building devoted to the history of the building."

"It is not only Waltham's history, but it's America's history," Arena says. "Everybody's beginning to realize we've got a

great history here in Waltham."

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