



Razing of former Gilbert paper mill site showcases Menasha's waterfront focus

By Michael King • Post-Crescent staff writer • May 20, 2010

MENASHA — Brian Tungate sees an analogy between the development of the Fox Cities trestle trail and the future redevelopment of the Fox River frontage now visible at the former Gilbert paper mill site.

Tungate, the city's parks and recreation director who was one of the speakers during a forum Wednesday night on waterfront opportunities in Menasha, said the popular trestle trail "was a good idea that was presented 10 years before it was built. All good things take a long time to come to fruition. This is going to be every bit as challenging as the trestle trail, if not more."

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About 50 residents attended the forum that focused most of its attention on the 12-acre former industrial site being converted into a private and public redevelopment opportunity along the north channel of the Fox River.

The challenge arises because of the unsettled economy and limited financial resources available through the city to entice private investment or to build public amenities along the shoreline being donated to the city by the property owners.

"We have plans for restaurants, we have plans for

retail, businesses and offices," said Joe Dorava, an engineer with Vierbicher Associates Inc., a Reedsburg firm engaged to create a site redevelopment plan. "But we really don't know what's going to end up on the site.

"We're looking for other ways to make the site more attractive, more creative. It's really a jewel. It really is an asset."

The plan calls for mixed-use development, including possible multi-story residential housing. It also presents concept plans for shoreline naturalization, development of a recreational trail, creation of fishing and passive recreational opportunities, and converting the bypass channel that flows under the mill for potential future whitewater recreation uses.

Preliminary hydraulic modeling indicates that the bypass channel contains sufficient flow to support development of a whitewater course. Tungate described a plan to create a shoreline recreational trail and to transform the 60- to 70-foot-wide mill bypass channel to a meandering stream 20- to 25-foot-wide with rocks and vegetation to become a good fishing habitat.

"We want to create an active outdoor destination," Tungate said. "We want to create a walking loop with downtown. There's a good synergy with an urban setting downtown and a softer experience on what's now the southside of downtown."

The Vierbicher study revealed the following

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preliminary cost estimates: \$714,500 for 2,800 feet of recreational trail, including 300 feet of raised boardwalk over railroad piers, shoreline stabilization/naturalization and a wooden bridge; \$921,000 to convert the bypass channel to a whitewater course, including a water control structure to facilitate fish passage and control water flow, along with rip-rap and boulders in the channel; and, \$695,750 to build a concrete vehicle bridge over the bypass channel and a restroom facility.

"Everybody sees the potential for the site," said resident Chris Evenson. "It's just a matter of getting through some of what's on the city's plate currently and then hopefully some of these things are going to come to fruition."

"It's been very nice to see that open and be able to see the river and the downtown," said Judy Buss, who lives across from the Gilbert duck pond along Ahnaip Street. "The idea of having access to the river site is nice."

"You really can't get at the water at all right now. Just the idea of being able to get to the water is a great idea."

"We have to develop a whole marketing program that brands Menasha as a place to be," said Kim Vanderhyden, president of Menasha Redevelopment Authority and a longtime community supporter going back to the marina project 25 years ago. "We have such a wonderful natural resource."

Tungate said the study is a concept plan that will be market driven by private investment.

"We have some ideas financially on how to make this happen but we've got to get things in motion here," Tungate said. "We're doing this for future generations. It's the next generation that we want to leave a more sustainable Menasha community."

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Future public waterfront amenities

Step 1: Waterfront improvements such as a recreational trail, fishing platforms and bank stabilization/naturalization likely will be the first amenities pursued through state Department of Natural Resources Stewardship grant funding. Next

application deadline: May 2011. Preliminary cost estimate: \$715,000 (Amount could be reduced by about \$200,000 if city crews provide some labor.) Step 2: Uncovering of the existing bypass channel as part of the demolition process would probably not occur until 2012. The city has created a developer-financed tax incremental finance (TIF) district No. 11 to facilitate private redevelopment efforts. Depending on the scope of future private investment, TIF resources may be sought to fund additional public infrastructure improvements or amenities. Step 3: Construction of a whitewater course is not expected to begin until 2013 or 2014 at the earliest depending upon completion of engineering plans for the course and a required water level control structure. Private development on the site likely would have to occur to spur the additional site improvements. Preliminary cost estimate: \$921,000, of which \$250,000 is for a new water control structure and \$175,000 for boulder and stone placement in the bypass channel. (Amount could be reduced by \$258,000 if city crews provide some labor.) Source: Vierbicher Associates Gilbert Mill Site Redevelopment Plan

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