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October 25, 2015 6:00AM

Renovation of Junction Shops complex nears completion



WORCESTER - Three other developers turned down redeveloping the Junction Shop complex, before Brady Sullivan Properties and Starr Development Partners stepped in and purchased the historic mill property in 2012.

Three years later, the partners are putting on the finishing touches to a new apartment complex, the Junction Shop Lofts, that features many of the mill's original qualities, as well as state-of-the-art amenities.

The 233,000 square foot mill complex, which was built in stages from 1850 to 1908, was home to the J.S. Wheeler & Co. machinist company, the Taylor & Farley Organ factory, the Knowles Loom Works and the Cereal Machine Company.

"In recent years, before we bought it, it was vacant, decrepit and deteriorating," said Chris Starr, president of Starr Development Partners. "It was a hazard to public safety."

Mr. Starr said that he has partnered with Brady Sullivan on similar projects before, including the Lancaster Mill complex in Clinton, as well as six projects in Rhode Island.

The partners currently have four other projects in various stages of construction, including Phase II of the Lancaster Mills in Clinton, as well as projects in Lawrence, Providence and Warren, R.I.

The partners specialize in purchasing old mill buildings and converting them to housing, although they have also been designated by the city to redevelop the former Worcester County Courthouse on Main Street, but are waiting for the city to complete some remediation work.

As with previous projects, Brady Sullivan and Starr Development will continue to own the building after it is completed.

"We are historically long-term owners," Mr. Starr said.

Mr. Starr said that he and his partners purchased the mill complex for \$1.1 million and then have invested more than \$20 million in renovating the nine-building complex.

“These are challenging projects, in terms of the actual construction, assembling the capital and because it is in a transitioning neighborhood,” he said.

Located less than two blocks from the Main South neighborhood, at 64 Beacon St., and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Junction Shops Lofts take up the entire block between Herman and Jackson streets.

Approximately 5,000 square feet of hard heart pine was removed from the building, reclaimed by Longleaf Lumber, Inc. of Cambridge and was installed as the flooring of a country club in Hamilton, Mass.

“We try to create super high quality housing, at relatively affordable prices,” Mr. Starr said.

Mr. Starr said that many of the units feature exposed brick, and large windows, which are the size of the original window openings. Historic doors, different mill gears and a safe that were discovered during the renovation process are on display in various places throughout the building.

As part of the renovation project, all 1,083 windows in the building were replaced, and each one was done according to specifications that satisfied the various government entities that had some oversight on the project, including the National Parks Service, Massachusetts Historical Commission, Worcester Historical Commission and Preservation Worcester.

The muntins (the bar or rigid supporting strip between adjacent panes of glass), meeting rails and exterior brick faces of the windows all had to meet specific size criteria, before any of the windows could be installed.

Rents start at \$1,095 for a one-bedroom apartment and increase to as much as \$2,000 for the larger three- and four-bedroom units. Of the 173 units, 102 have two bedrooms, and there are nearly 30 different floor plans, due to the unique size and shape of the building. Several of the three- and four-bedroom units are two-tier loft spaces that feature spiral staircases and gas fireplaces.

Amenities include a courtyard with fireplace, a gas grill and sitting area, community room, 16-seat movie theatre, a game room and a putting green.

“They are market rate, but they are relatively affordable,” Mr. Starr said. “When we do a project like this, we try to build a sense of community both within the neighborhood, but also within the complex itself.”

With only punch list items remaining, Mr. Starr said that the units are actively being rented, and that he hopes to have it fully rented within the next six months.

“We are having very strong traffic,” he said. “And the interest is coming from all over: empty nesters, young professionals and families.”

Mr. Starr said that a ribbon cutting ceremony is being planned to celebrate the project’s completion, and to thank all of the subcontractors who worked on the project and the lenders who provided the necessary financing.