

Iconic Canton factory targeted for condos, apartments, shops

Developers intend to save historic buildings at Collins Co. complex

By Don Stacom
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The iconic Collins Co. ax factory complex in Canton could become home to nearly 290 apartments and condos under a plan by the daughters of long-term property owner Rusty Tilney.

Sisters Lisa and Merritt Tilney intend to salvage all of the historically significant buildings

that can be saved, and will retain the unique patchwork of small canals and industrial waterways that run through the property.

The plan could include a brewery, a coffee shop and wine bar or restaurant, the Tilneys said Tuesday, and would definitely incorporate the numerous small antique shops that operate on part of the property now.

Overall, they emphasized that they are committed to retaining the unique character of a nearly two century-old former industrial complex of brick and clapboard buildings along the

Farmington River in the heart of Collinsville, Canton's arts-and-antiques hub.

"As an architect, I can say you don't see places like this. And today you can't create something like this," Lisa Tilney said. "You have the Green, the beautiful church, the Victorian homes, it's eclectic and amazing."

But because of the complex nature of the project, the first apartments or condos might not be on the market for another five to six years, the Tilneys cautioned.

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The sisters' business, Collinsville Redevelopment Co., is applying for a wetlands permit, the first step in what's anticipated to be a lengthy process of getting approvals to repair some of the canals, replace utilities and create driveways through the property.

Because of the proximity of the Farmington River, the complex project will need to undergo a mix of local state and even federal reviews. Environmental issues from water quality to the state of local fish and wildlife will all be considered, and the state will be reviewing the traffic impact.

The state and local permitting process will take a year to a year and a half or more before environmental cleanup can begin, the Tilneys said. The project will be built in phases, and it's unlikely that tenants could move into the first wave of homes before 2029 or 2030, they said Tuesday.

"Our intent is to keep as much of the existing fabric as possible while enhancing the site with new infrastructure and (eventually) renovated buildings," Merritt Tilney said. "Our emphasis is on improved connections from Main Street, through the site, and to the Farmington River with a series of stairs and accessible ramps, new green space, and new paths to the water."

Several years ago, Ranger Properties proposed a massive project on the site that would have added 200 apartments, restaurants and an entertainment venue, a riverwalk, a parking garage and more. A neighbor tied up that proposal with a lengthy lawsuit, and Ranger eventually dropped it.

The Tilneys said they haven't determined how big the apartments and condos would be, nor what they'd rent for. They said the project would at least meet Canton's requirement for 15 percent of units to be set aside as affordable housing, but it's too early to know the details of how that would work.

Collinsville Redevelopment is expected to seek state brownfields cleanup aid and eventually historic preservation tax credits. The Tilneys said they anticipate salvaging 20 of the property's 28 buildings including all of the most historically significant ones.

Canton officials have warned for years that the complex is deteriorating and needs intervention if it's to be saved.

The business that grew into the world's largest factory started on the site in 1826, with the company putting on small additions and erecting additional buildings over the years. The Collins brand became internationally famous in the 1800s and early 1900s, but the industry had already slowed by the time the Flood of 1955 wrecked part of the complex. In 1966, the factory shut down altogether.