

# A labor of love

Two sisters plan massive makeover of historic Collinsville factory where ‘community’ is core



Top: Merritt and Lisa Tilney at the former Collins Co. ax factory in Canton, a 19th century industrial complex they want to renovate into housing with a commercial hub. Above: Merritt Tilney checks in with a tenant at the complex. Don Stacom/Hartford Courant photos

BY DON STACOM | HARTFORD COURANT

After decades of stalls and failed starts, the complex renovation of the historic Collins Co. ax factory complex in Canton is now gradually gaining steam toward Merritt and Lisa Tilney’s vision of apartments, condos and a small retail/commercial hub that builds on Collinsville’s community character.

The Tilney sisters plan to bring a detailed proposal to town planners this fall for what would be one of Connecticut's most complicated and ambitious renewals of a 19th century waterfront industrial center.

Unlike previous developers, who've talked of entertainment centers, large restaurants and even a hotel to accompany a core residential complex, the Tilneys are focused on restoring as much of the sprawling Collins property as possible in a way that blends in with Collinsville.

And a key to that has been retaining the collection of small artisan businesses, crafts shops, jewelry nooks and others that operate the web of brick buildings spread across nearly 20 acres on the Farmington River at the Burlington line.

Most of the 150,000 square feet is empty, but the network of little businesses that function there is important to the village and to the redevelopment project, the Tilneys said during a recent tour of the complex.

"There are about 50 tenants, small offices, T-shirt manufacturing, graphics designers; it's pretty vibrant," Merritt Tilney said, walking through a series of buildings with exposed brickwork, beams and even original wood floors. "There are a couple of guys here whose grandfathers worked in the Collins factory.

"We'd like to keep people here. When we do this, they may not have exactly the space they had before at the same rent because things will be better. But there's a lot of unused space, so we're hoping we can make it work for people," she said. "We not only want the buildings to keep the character, but also the people. It's important to community."

The Tilney sisters know well that reconstruction of the historic buildings won't begin until the late 2020s at soonest; there will be years of site preparations, canal and waterways restoration, erosion and sedimentation control work, environmental cleanup and construction of 224 apartments in new four-story buildings before then.

There will be an additional new building with 48 condos, and the historic four-story Granite Building will be remodeled with 16 more.

The project requires an off-putting mix of state, local and federal approvals for utilities, canals and waterways through the complex, work near the Farmington River and more.

Part of the financing plan entails state historic preservation credits, a lucrative benefit for developers that nevertheless requires painstaking and costly work to match many of the materials, colors and construction techniques from a century ago.

But the sisters' devotion to the project comes across as a labor of love: They openly acknowledge that they don't anticipate getting rich from the project, but instead are looking at it as a family legacy and a way to contribute to Collinsville. That section of Canton has long been known for an eclectic collection of galleries, yoga studios, small shops, gathering spots for kayakers as well as for riders on the rail trail.

The Tilneys' father, Rusty, bought the complex in 2002 with a similar goal, but could never get the right mix of investors, business partners and market conditions to make it work.

It appeared he was on the brink of success three years ago when Sheldon Stein's New York-base Ranger Properties made preliminary moves toward a large-scale redevelopment, but a lengthy lawsuit by a neighbor, changing market conditions and Stein's health scuttled that possibility.

More recently Rusty Tilney himself suffered health setbacks, and his two daughters have taken charge of salvaging the property before more of the weather-worn buildings erode beyond repair.

"These buildings need a lot of work, but keeping them inhabited has kept the vandalism down, it's kept the heat on. Tenants really understand what's going on here: You pay a below-market rent, and everyone owns making it work. The HVAC systems are 21st century," Merritt Tilney said.

The Tilneys have worked extensively with community organizations and local planners on ways to design the project to most smoothly complement what already exists in Collinsville.

Much of the parking is planned as underground on the hilly property, and the sisters are looking to build a large, attractive staircase and ramp to better connect buildings on the lower level with those that are at street level.

The local wetlands board gave an approval in June, and the sisters intend to present the town's Planning and Zoning Commission with a site plan proposal in the later summer or fall.