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Unanimous ‘yes’ for plans to restore iconic former mill along the Farmington River



Jessica Hill / Special to the Courant
Collins Co. ax factory in Canton's Collinsville section in 2022.



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As they strategize on how to restore the landmark [Collins Co. ax factory complex](#) in Canton, sisters Lisa and Merritt Tilney got a major boost when Canton planners unanimously backed the first stages of their plan to create nearly 300 new apartments and condos.

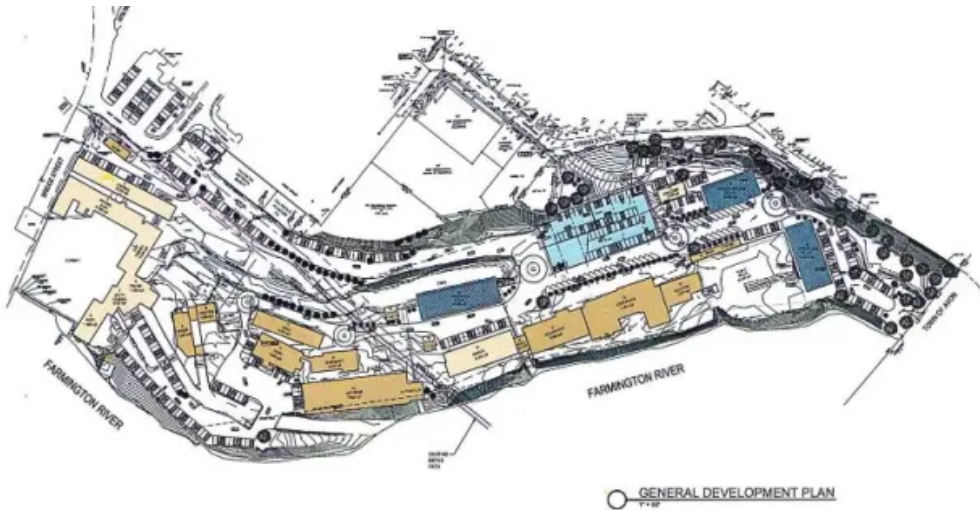
Their proposal is by far the largest single project in the town's Collinsville section since the business was started nearly a century ago, and supporters believe it's the best — and potentially last — opportunity to salvage the waterfront industrial complex.

A zoning hearing last week focused on technical matters including soil removal, but also gave the deepest insight so far into the Tilneys' vision for renovating the waterfront industrial property, restoring 142,000 square feet of its original structures, and putting up three new multistory residential buildings.

The complex has largely languished over the past 60 years, even though it's in the heart of a popular village and located along the Farmington River. Restoration is enormously complex because of the wide variety of concerns: maintaining the canals that run through the property, addressing contaminated ground or building components, dealing with invasive plant species that could erode the banks of waterways.

The heart of the work entails the costly challenge of rehabilitating about 20 historic buildings and building three new multi-story structures, along with a roadway and parking.

The Tilneys' father, Rusty, bought the property in 2002 and repeatedly tried to restore it under the @Collinsville name, but never succeeded. His daughters began taking the lead with the property about two years ago and appear to have made progress in hiring consultants, soil scientists, waterways experts and others to navigate a challenging series of local, state and even federal regulatory boards they must satisfy.



Plans for the Collins Co. ax factory redevelopment. (Courtesy of Town of Canton)

A few nearby homeowners have balked, warning that a large-scale mixed-use project will bring heavier traffic along with the risk of more noise and light pollution for surrounding houses.

“Can little downtown Collinsville really handle this much traffic?,” Bristol Drive resident Patti Fehr asked the planning and zoning commission in an email. “I would love to see the property developed but does it have to be this big? I feel this is going to overwhelm Collinsville’s walkable charm and forever change it.”

Leesa Lawson and Joseph Hoke of Spring Street asked the commission to look for ways that traffic could enter and exit the complex from a direction other than Spring Street, and called for more ways to minimize the impact on neighbors.

“Relocate new residential buildings further from the residential village end of the property,” they wrote. “This ensures more open space on the eastern part of the property. If buildings remain in the current proposed location, limit buildings to three stories. This will minimize visual impact on the neighborhood.”



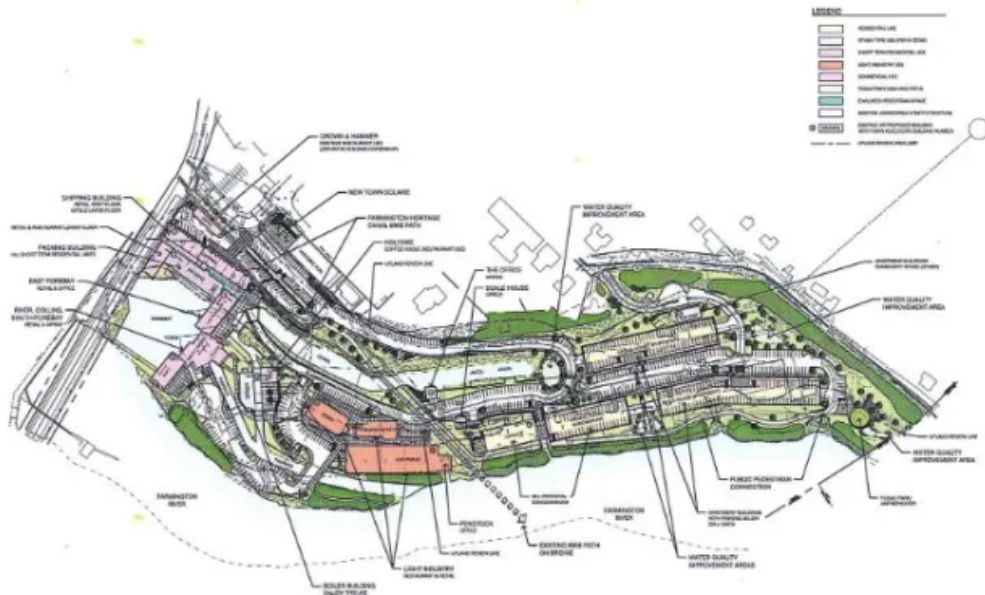
Part of the Collins Co. ax factory earlier this year. (Don Stacom/The Hartford Courant)

Supporters contend there's a major opportunity for Canton at stake, and caution that the Tilneys' proposal might be the best or even last hope of salvaging the landmark complex.

"Without this development, the town may well see a brownfield site that generates little more than bills for demolition and police surveillance," wrote Matthew Dingee, chair of the town's economic development agency. "That is a future that Canton can ill afford."

"Economically, this application is the gateway to increasing the town's annual tax revenue by \$1 million or more. It also holds the potential for attracting commerce to Collinsville and Canton as a whole," Dingee wrote.

The Tilneys' plan, presented through the Collinsville Redevelopment Co., meticulously works to minimize the impact on nearby homeowners and to achieve environmental protection goals as well, according to supporters.



"Saving this piece of Collinsville history has been something residents have worried about for years," according to Rep. Eleni Kavros DeGraw, a Democrat. "CRC's plan is thorough and forward-looking, and has managed the near-impossible with its thoughtful eye toward sensitivity to the larger community."

Republican state Sen. Lisa Seminara is also urging commissioners to support the plan.

"The revitalization of the ax factory site represents an important economic opportunity for the area. The proposal envisions renovating the existing building for commercial use and will attract additional tenants and their clients," Seminara wrote. "Additionally, the 290 new residential units will add to the economy and represent much needed housing, approximately 15% of which will be affordable."

A leader of Canton Advocates for Responsible Expansion told commissioners at the hearing last week that this is the best plan for the property, and the commission voted 6-0 to support it.

"We are buoyed by the unanimous vote that our site work plans conform with the town's land use regulations," the Tilneys said in a statement after the vote. "Collinsville is a special place, we care about the historic character of the factory, we care about our tenants and neighbors and we are eager to work with them all as we move forward with this complex project."

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