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Zoning change spurs rehab hope for city's oldest mill building

By Nick Kotsopoulos TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Hopes to preserve what is believed to be the oldest mill building in the city have been kept alive, with the Planning Board recommending an amendment to the city's zoning ordinance that would allow the renovation of the property into apartments and town houses.

Robert E. Longden, a lawyer representing Beacon Herman LLC, owner of 64 and 79 Beacon St. within the former Junction Shops Manufacturing District, said a key to reviving the long-delayed project is allowing single-family attached dwellings, commonly known as town houses, as part of the development project.

Currently, town houses are not a permitted use within an Adaptive Reuse Overlay District, such as the one that was approved in 2004 for the redevelopment of 64 and 79 Beacon St. in the Main South area.

Plans for the vacant, historic mill building at 64 Beacon St. originally called for renovating it into 181 apartment units. But the project has stalled for a variety of reasons since 2004, even though the Planning Board extended its approval for it in 2005, 2006 and 2007.

Mr. Longden said there is a purchase-and-sale agreement with a potential new developer, Legacy Park Apartments LLC, which wants to increase the scope of the project by having 193 residential units, and including town houses as part of the overall development.

Of the 193 residential units Legacy Park wants to create, Mr. Longden said 133 apartment units would be within the three-story, brick factory building at 64 Beacon St., which is listed on the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System and the National Register of Historic Places.

Also, 33 town house units would be created along the northerly side of Beacon Street and a new 27-unit, multifamily low-rise building would be constructed at Beacon and Jackson streets.

Mr. Longden said part of the existing mill building has to be demolished because it has lost its structural integrity. He said the building has been steadily deteriorating over the years.

The building that stood at 79 Beacon St. had to be razed nearly years ago under an emergency demolition order issued by the city manager because of serious structural issues with it.

“Allowing town houses within this (Adaptive Reuse Overlay) district will result in the preservation and reuse of this historic building,” Mr. Longden said.

Joel Fontane, director of the city's Planning and Regulatory Services Division, said the Junction Shops building is considered a key building that the city wants to see preserved.

He said the mix of new construction with the adaptive reuse of the old mill makes the project more viable.

The Planning Board voted 3-0 Wednesday night in favor of the zoning ordinance amendment, and its recommendation will next go to the City Council for its consideration.

The former factory building at 64 Beacon St. was built between 1870 and 1878 and is one of the few remaining factory buildings in what was the Junction Shops Manufacturing District. The buildings within the district played an important role in the history of industry in Worcester.

The building was occupied by Glasgo Thread Works during the 1880s and by the Worcester Corset Co. during the 1890s. Through later mergers, the building complex became part of the Junction Shops Manufacturing Co., which was one of the largest mill buildings in the city at the time of its construction.

It is considered the best remaining example of 19th century industrial buildings in the city.

Last April, Beacon Herman LLC petitioned the Historical Commission to waive the city's one-year demolition delay ordinance for the Junction Shops building, saying it had fallen into a state of disrepair because it had been abandoned for many years.

The owner also claimed that structural deficiencies in the building require that it be demolished to revive the site for the construction of multifamily housing.

But the Historical Commission ended up rejecting the request for a waiver, saying the owner had failed to demonstrate an undue economic hardship would exist by having to wait one year before being able to raze the building.

The commission also felt the demolition of the building would be detrimental to the architectural and historical resources of the city.