

Easton partners with developer on scaled-back shovel factory housing plan

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EASTON — Seven months ago, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the former Ames shovel factory in North Easton to its list of the most endangered historic places in the nation.

On Monday, the organization's regional director praised plans by the town of Easton and a private developer to turn the complex into 119 apartments along with a museum, a self-guided walking tour and a 1.5-acre public park.

"As preservationists we are thrilled," said Wendy Nicholas, northeast regional director for the National Trust. "The Ames Shovel Shops is such an important historic treasure in our commonwealth and the nation. To preserve that, and to have it continue in some use, is fantastic."

Town Administrator David A. Colton announced this week that Beacon Communities Development of Boston has a tentative agreement to buy the shovel shop property from developers George and Robert Turner, who hold a comprehensive permit to build an affordable housing development with 160 to 182 units there.

Beacon, partnering financially with the town, would build a smaller project of only 119 apartments, modeled on a proposal developed last year by architects and consultants working for the Friends of the Ames Shovel Works. Beacon would make use of federal and state tax credits for affordable housing and historic preservation.

"I saw the preliminary sketches from Beacon last week, and we were very, very pleased with the approach they're taking," said David Ames of Cambridge, president of the Friends. "We think they can make these buildings a really vital part of North Easton for generations."

James W. Igoe, president of Preservation Massachusetts, which named the shovel complex to the list of the state's most endangered historic resources in 2008, also was pleased with the proposal.

"We were dancing in the streets," said Igoe. "As a preservation organization, we're thrilled. We will do everything we can as a statewide preservation organization to make sure the project goes in the right direction, whether it's helping to secure federal or state historic tax credits or anything that is needed."

Among Beacon's recent redevelopment projects are the restoration of the Wilber School, across from Sharon Town Hall, into apartments, and the renovation of an abandoned shoe factory in downtown Haverhill into housing.

"We are very impressed with what they've done," said Igoe. "A developer of that caliber bodes well for Easton. I think a good project will come from that, I really do."

Nicholas said Beacon has a "good track record in historic preservation real estate development."

The partnership between the town and the developer, which would require Easton to use money from its Community Preservation fund to pay for a preservation restriction and as a loan for upfront costs, is not unusual, Nicholas said.

"Lots of times cities and towns that are eager for a prominent piece of real estate to be redeveloped will jump through all sorts of hoops to realize the project," said Nicholas. "There are certainly lots of situations where communities have found ways to make it happen."

The history of the shovel factory is "extraordinary," said Nicholas. "The westward expansion of America, the development of the railroad, the Gold Rush, Ames shovels were involved."

Colton told selectmen Monday that he hopes to have the redevelopment proposal ready for voters at the spring annual town meeting, but will have to secure a favorable recommendation for the use of money from the Community Preservation Committee first.

The committee will hear the full proposal in December, Colton said.

Selectmen, meanwhile, seemed to favor the plan.

"So many ideas I heard from different people are being implemented in this agreement. I like it," said Selectman Charles P. King.

Selectman Ellen Barlow called the public-private partnership "an exciting collaboration."

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