

October 24, 2007

Sowing artistic seeds

Former factory building eyed for arts colony

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REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY — Behind Waterbury's police headquarters on East Main Street is a large and nearly vacant brick factory building that downtown boosters are angling to turn into a trendy arts colony.

Main Street Waterbury, a downtown revitalization group, began planning the conversion six months ago with the blessing of the building's owner, a limited liability corporation headed by developer Ralph Monti. Last week, the group received a \$10,000 grant from the Main Street Connecticut program to develop a cost estimate and basic plans.

Architect Robert Halgreen, a volunteer with Main Street Waterbury, envisions 21 apartments in the factory building at 54 Maple St., along with a dance studio and workspace for a variety of artists. He gives a rough estimate of \$11 million for the effort.

The colony would boost efforts to foster an arts and entertainment community in the downtown, said Waterbury Main Street CEO Carl Rosa.

"Now that we have the synergy of the Palace (Theater) and the (Waterbury Arts) Magnet School, we are trying to draw in private artists to close the loop," Rosa said.

Main Street is developing the basic concept and has located potential tenants. Rosa hopes the city's development arm, the Waterbury Development Corp., can identify funding sources and see the project through.

A possibly important ally in that funding search, state Sen. Joan Hartley, D-15th District, toured the factory Tuesday morning, along with artists, local pastors, Main Street Waterbury members and representatives from the revitalization group [Naugatuck Valley Project](#).

Apart from a small wood working studio, the 38,880 square-foot factory has long been vacant. Dust has built up on metal shelves and caked hardwood floors. The four-story building has high ceilings and tall windows attractive to artists.

Organizers say the building enjoys another advantage over many of Waterbury's vacant factories — it's not contaminated with industrial pollutants.

"I think this project will help the community, bringing jobs and people from other places," said the Rev. Efrain Rosa of Iglesia Cristiana Casa Del Perdon, a storefront church near by. "I think it will help put Waterbury on the map." Hartley agreed, and said she's excited about the project's potential to aid in the revival of East Main Street.

Connecticut Dance Theater, currently based in Watertown, is angling for space in the colony. The group's artistic director, Donna Bonasera, said it would allow her to house international students. She's also eager to partner with nearby schools, including the downtown University of Connecticut campus.

Rosa said potential tenants would like to occupy the building in a year, a goal he described as ambitious but possible.

"Whether that happens or not depends on how quickly we can get together a proposal and get this in play," Rosa said.

After the factory is finished, organizers hope to rehab two smaller buildings nearby.

Directly across Maple Street is a simple metal-sided building that houses White Welding. Organizers hope to help the business find larger accommodations and then transform the shop into a sculpting studio. Just across North Elm Street from the welding shop is a vacant medical clinic that organizers believe could house a coffee shop and retail art studio. *END*