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Turning an old textile factory into mixed-income housing will help revitalize downtown, say city and nonprofit officials.

By ANN KIM, Staff Writer

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Several dozen people turn out at an old Biddeford mill Monday for the groundbreaking of a Maine Workforce Housing conversion project. The mill being converted is in the background on the right.



Larry Mitchell puts up a stud wall in The Mill at Saco Falls. Forty of the 66 units being built will be reserved for people earning 50 percent or less of the area's median income.



Photos by Gregory Rice/Staff Photographer
This arched area will be part of the fitness room in the basement of The Mill at Saco Falls, a \$14.4 million project converting a 165-year-old building originally used by Laconia Manufacturing Co. into 66 apartments. A tour of the 80,000-square-foot property took place Monday.

Maine Workforce Housing.

The apartments will be in an 80,000-square-foot building originally used by the Laconia Manufacturing Co. Some elements of the 165-year-old building will be retained through the conversion, which began last month.

Drywall will cover the brick inside the building, but the beveled edges around the windows will remain visible. The heavy carrying beams will be exposed on all but the top level, where extra insulation will be needed. The cornices and granite lintels will remain.

Such details are too expensive to add, Szanton said, so he's glad to have them in place already.

"It's a great thing to be able to preserve that and bring it back to life," he said as he led a tour of the property.

The affordable housing units will be reserved for households with incomes that are 50 percent or less of the area's median. For a household of four, 50 percent of the median income is \$31,900 a year.

For one-bedroom units, the low-income rent will be about \$550 a month and the market rate will be about \$760. For two-bedroom units, the rents will be about \$670 at the low-income rate and \$885 at the market rate. Three-bedroom units, which won't be available to market-rate tenants, will rent for about \$790 a month. Rent will include heat, hot water, wireless Internet and a parking space.

The project was awarded \$6.2 million in tax credit exchange and tax credit assistance funds made available to work force housing projects through the federal stimulus package. The project was also granted \$3 million through the state historic tax credit program and \$600,000 in deferred loans from the state housing authority.

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BIDDEFORD — Monday's heavy rain and gusty winds didn't dampen enthusiasm for a project to convert a former textile mill into a mixed-income apartment building by fall.

The ceremonial groundbreaking for The Mill at Saco Falls in the Riverdam Mill complex drew several dozen people, who shivered under umbrellas or huddled under a canopy over the podium. The \$14.4 million project by Maine Workforce Housing will produce 40 units of affordable housing and 26 units that will be rented out at market rates.

Mayor Joanne Twomey touted the project for its affordable housing and its role in Biddeford's revitalization.

"This is the new vision for Biddeford," she said. "We are on the move."

As dignitaries dug into a sand pile with golden shovels, a backhoe rooted around in the debris of a demolished loading dock farther down the driveway. In the coming days, one of the buildings behind the debris will also be torn down. The result will be an open view of the Saco River and a connection to a proposed downtown path along the river.

"One of the things we're most excited about is the views our tenants will have," said Nathan Szanton, one of Maine Workforce Housing's principals.

The other principal is Robert C.S. Monks, who is an investor in MaineToday Media Inc. and a member of its board of directors. MaineToday Media owns the Portland Press Herald and Maine Sunday Telegram and its sister papers in central Maine.

The Mill at Saco Falls helps draw attention to the potential of downtown Biddeford, which will become more vibrant as interest in the area grows, said Ezekiel Callanan, executive director of the Heart of Biddeford, a downtown revitalization organization.

"As far as making a symbolic statement to development here, it is extremely significant," he said.

Biddeford has about 2 million square feet of mill space, about half of which is vacant, said City Manager John Bubier. The largest vacant portion — about 800,000 square feet — is the former WestPoint Home textile mill, which closed last year.

The Mill at Saco Falls is part of a complex of 10 buildings built from 1845 to 1940. Stephen Goodrich, a businessman from Falmouth, bought the 300,000-square-foot complex in 2008 and later sold a mill building to