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A down-by-the-old-mill dream

The college in Biddeford needs student housing, and the city's mill area has lots of space. Could the combination work?

By ANNE GLEASON Staff Writer

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Susumu Ikeda, right, of Japan and Californian Chris Andrews unpack items while setting up their dorm room in UNE's Avila Hall. They have another roommate, Kevin Toohey of New Hampshire, who is not pictured.

BIDDEFORD — Growing enrollment and limited space for expansion are putting the squeeze on student housing at the University of New England's coastal campus.

But university and city officials and developers think a solution could exist four miles up the road, in Biddeford's revitalized downtown mill area, which already includes a growing number of small businesses, cafes and artists' studios.

Biddeford City Manager John Bubier says the university's housing need could present an opportunity for downtown Biddeford and the mill area.

Last month, the city arranged a meeting between mill developers and university representatives to discuss the university's need for about 200 units of affordable student housing for upperclassmen.

Doug Sanford, owner of the North Dam Mill and one of several developers at the meeting, already is working to create residential units inside Biddeford's red-brick mills.

He received preliminary approval from the city's Planning Board in early August for as many as 40 units, as well as additional commercial and industrial space.

Housing for off-campus students could end up as part of the plan, Sanford said.

"I would love to build a partnership," he said. "It's young people -- it's creativity. I'd really love to have them as a piece of this (mill redevelopment)."

Since 2001, the entire university, which includes a Portland campus, has grown from about 1,400 undergraduate students to about 2,000 students, according to Alan Liebrecht, vice president for enrollment management.

Most seniors already live off-campus. Freshmen, sophomores and juniors must live on campus.

With additional off-campus housing, however, the university could decide to let some juniors live off campus, and free up space in residential halls, said Barbara Hazard, vice president for student affairs at UNE. Students already have to triple up in some rooms in the university's brand new dormitory on campus, she said.

Seniors have traditionally opted to live in seasonal homes in Hills Beach or Fortunes Rocks, near the campus, Hazard said. However, those seasonal homes are becoming less available.

"It's great if you can get it," she said.

Many students now end up elsewhere in Biddeford, in Old Orchard Beach or in Portland. A designated off-campus site downtown could provide another option, Hazard said. Even with the development of an off-campus housing site, students could



Parents and new students carry belongings into UNE's Avila Hall. Some students are tripled up in their dorms.



Photos by Jill Brady/Staff Photographer
Freshmen and first-year athletes participate.

in a team-building exercise Sunday on the University of New England campus in Biddeford. With enrollment growing, UNE is talking with Biddeford mill redevelopers about creating up to 200 new housing units for upperclassmen.

choose where to live off-campus, Hazard said.

Ariana Nesbit, a 20-year-old UNE junior, lives on campus but said a friend of hers had trouble finding housing and ended up renting in Old Orchard Beach. "He wasn't happy about it," she said. "I think a lot of people have been having trouble finding housing."

Alfred Street.

Teegan Brown, 21, a senior, found an apartment downtown on

Brown said off-campus housing in the convenient areas, like Hills Beach, is available, but only for students with enough money or a large group to split the costs. Housing in the mill area would be attractive, she said, as long as it was affordable.

The talks about downtown housing are still preliminary, but Hazard said the sooner any arrangement can be reached, the better.

"In our mind, we needed to be doing this three weeks ago or before," Hazard said of continued discussions. "We would like to have a certain number of available units next year."

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