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Mill cleanup a big step for Sanford downtown revitalization

SANFORD — Work is expected to begin on the cleanup at the former mill building at 61 Washington Street within the next two weeks, although activity may not be immediately apparent to passers-by.

Town councilors voted earlier this month to hire Crede Associates LLC, of Portland, to oversee and administer the cleanup project in and around the Sanford Mill. The consulting firm is currently in the process of obtaining permits and hiring subcontractors for the project, according to Sanford Planning Director James Gulnac, and work can begin as soon as those details are in place.

"This is the beginning, right here," said Gulnac of the project he hopes will be the first step in the revitalization and redevelopment of the riverfront and millyard area.

Gulnac said observers may not see much going on in the area when work starts since much of the remediation work is inside the building.

The Sanford Mill property has been identified as a "brownfields" site by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and is therefore eligible for grants and loans through the agency's Brownfields Program, which focuses on the reuse of blighted or abandoned properties. Brownfields are properties that are suspected of being contaminated with hazardous substances due their history of previous uses. Because of the possible contamination and the associated liability, owners and developers are generally not willing to renovate brownfields properties fearing that the cleanup costs will exceed any benefit they might realize from the property.

The Brownfields Program was created to provide communities with funds to assess such properties for the presence of hazardous substances, to help them develop a cleanup plan and then, through grants and loans, to clean up the property.

The Town has completed the first phase of the assessment of the Sanford Mill — determining the extent of the contamination based on the history of the property — and has completed some of Phase II of the assessment. Phase II includes taking samples on the site to verify what kinds of hazardous substances are present and where they are. Phase II also includes a remediation plan.

The assessment at the Sanford Mill showed asbestos inside the building as wells as in the roofing, peeling lead paint and "universal wastes including ballasts, bulbs, transformers and switches." The estimate also anticipates the removal and disposal of 140 tons of PCB contaminated soils and 20 tons of "special waste soils," removal of abandoned fuel oil tanks in the basement, the old boiler and piping throughout the building.

Throughout the procedure, waste and soil will must be tested for contaminants and, after the contaminated soil is removed, the property will be backfilled with clean soil and loam and seeded.

The initial cost estimate for the cleanup work at the Sanford Mill is about \$1 million, but Gulnac pointed out that is just an estimate. Credere Associates may find there is less contamination than the assessment indicated, or they may find more work is necessary, once workers start removing debris.

The Town has received a \$160,000 Brownfields Grant through the Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission (SMRPC), which requires \$32,000 in matching funds, as well as a \$200,000 Brownfields Cleanup Grant through stimulus funding, which does not require any local matching funds, Gulnac said.

Gulnac likened the possible contamination of the site to an iceberg in that what can be easily seen may be only a small part of the reality. The largest portion of an iceberg is underwater and cannot be seen from the surface. Like an iceberg, Sanford's old mills may have secrets lurking under them that will only be discovered during cleanup and may require further remediation work.

The Sanford Mill is a former textile mill and was purchased in recent years by Patrick Fagan, who planned to transform it into residential units and commercial space. However, Fagan ran out of money for the project shortly after he began and left the building partially gutted with most of its large windows knocked out.

For about a year and a half there was no further work on the property and last fall the town council determined it was a blight on the neighborhood and voted to take the mill property by eminent domain to prevent its further deterioration.

The Town has a development agreement (a memorandum of understanding) with Northland Enterprises, LLC, of Portland, a development company that plans to transform the mill into residential units, with commercial or office space on the ground floor.

That plan also includes properties directly behind the Sanford Mill — the former Aerofab, Inc., building as well as property owned by Northern Properties, LLC. The Town took both properties by eminent domain in June and plans to take down the Aerofab building and turn the site into parking for the Sanford Mill.

Phase I and II assessments have already been done on the Aerofab site and Sanford was awarded a \$200,000 Brownfields Cleanup Grant in May for the work. Sanford received another \$200,000 in Brownfields Grant funds in May to conduct further environmental assessments in the community.