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Changing Winooski

Free Press Staff Report

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The prominent steel skeleton of a building that juts out of the construction site in downtown Winooski is the most visible sign that the long-awaited revitalization is real and moving forward.

Sidelined since the mills left town, Winooski has struggled for decades beside its successful sister, Burlington. The hope is that this mega-redevelopment project will enhance Winooski's good qualities and seal the critical connection to the bright lights just across the river.

It is an impressive venture that has the makings of a success story. Right now, the project is an enormous mucky hole in the center of town, but don't blink. Construction is moving quickly on the mix of housing, offices and retail space.

Here's a quick look at what is planned:

A 930-space, 7-story, open parking structure, which will not be visible from the surrounding streets because it will be wrapped by the project's new buildings. It is scheduled to open July 2005.

Vermont Student Assistance Corp. building, four stories, 130,000 square feet fronting East Allen Street. Scheduled to open December 2005.

West Block apartments for University of Vermont students -- 100 suites for about 300 students. Street-level retail space of 15,000 square feet. Occupancy January 2006.

Central Block -- 230 rentals, a mix of market rate and median income, with one underground parking space per apartment, with 120 apartments and some ground-level retail space ready by spring 2006.

About 180 condominiums along the Winooski River with a base price of \$180,000, developed in four 45-unit chunks, for sale starting in 2007 and phased in until 2010.

Renovations to Champlain Mill with plans to house the Winooski Public Library and Winooski Historical Society.

Also, down the road, a hotel and office complex are proposed.

Ambitious? Absolutely. Especially considering Winooski's 30-year history of unsuccessful urban renewal. But the proponents of the project, who have stuck with it through its ups and downs, deserve credit for pushing forward. These include Bill Niquette, a seventh-generation Winooski resident, who provided the vision and enthusiasm that got the project off the ground; and Gerry Myers, a native of Winooski who retired from the U.S. Air Force to become the city's manager and is now the steady hand guiding the redevelopment.

There were several false starts, but the shovels went into the ground in June after Boston developer HallKeen came on board and the Douglas administration was given sufficient assurances to guarantee federal loans for Winooski's \$24 million investment in roads, the parking structure, infrastructure and land for the estimated \$200 million redevelopment.

Perhaps the most enticing aspect of the project is that it takes full advantage of the city's most prized asset -- the dramatic, rushing Winooski River. A raised river walk, about 12-feet wide, will border the river. Many of the proposed condominiums will also have views of the river and easy access to a 60-acre natural area of trails and woodlands along the river.

Aesthetics are high on the list for the redevelopment with underground utilities, ample green space and all buildings uniformly red brick to match the historic Winooski Block and Champlain Mill. Pedestrian safety in the downtown is also a priority with new pedestrian access lights and narrow street crossings. A large stormwater pond to divert polluted runoff away from the river also makes it an environmentally friendly development.

As with any change, this sweeping project has elicited some apprehension. As the core of their city changes, some residents and business owners have expressed a desire to ensure that Winooski doesn't become a city they don't recognize. True to their roots, members of this fledgling downtown association want to keep Winooski a welcoming place, not an elitist destination.

That earnest sentiment must be respected. The changes in Winooski are monumental. Residents and businesses have a right to be excited for a brighter future but a little wistful for the old, small town character they have always known.

For the project to be successful, the old and the new will work in concert to provide a better Winooski.

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