



N.C. developer proposes to convert former Coventry mill into 125 apartments

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COVENTRY — Developer Thomas Niemann has transformed tobacco mills in North Carolina and a former arsenal in Maine into residential buildings.

Now, Nieman, a principal of Niemann Capital, based in Durham, N.C., is setting his sights on the Anthony Mill, the former textile and dye operation that once was the hub of Anthony Village, an area town officials hope to list someday on the National Register of Historic Places.

Tomorrow night at 7 in Town Hall, the Planning Commission will hold a hearing on his request for approval of his master plan for the complex and for a recommendation that the Town Council grant a zone change for the property, from industrial to mill-conversion district. He would convert the mill buildings into apartments.

Nieman, who a company spokesman said has been performing mill conversions for 14 years, did not return a call yesterday seeking comment.

He owns the Anthony Mill property, which comprises three stone-and-stucco buildings on five acres at Washington Street and Laurel Avenue. The oldest structure, built in 1872, rises five stories and includes two six-story towers. The others are a two-story building, erected in 1922, and a single-story building.

Niemann proposes to redevelop the buildings to produce a total of 125 apartment units: 15 studio lofts, 38 one-bedroom units; 62 two-bedroom units and 10 three-bedroom units. It also would include about 22,000 square feet of office, retail and restaurant space. Amenities would include a gym and a community room.

Some apartments would have views of the Pawtuxet River, to the south. Nearby and to the west are the Coventry Greenway bicycle and walking trails.

The developer has secured federal and state historic tax credits for the project, officials said.

Assistant Town Planner Maren Luciani said the project would be similar to other mill conversions in Rhode Island, such as the Rising Sun Mills in Providence and the Royal Mills in West Warwick. It could also include an affordable housing component.

“This is the first time [in a while] that we’ve had a proposal for rentals” rather than condominiums, said Luciani. According to the Rhode Island Association of Realtors, first-quarter condo sales for this year have plunged some 37 percent.

“I think it’s just the way the market is going. The condo market is not secure. It will be interesting to see how it goes,” she said.

The town is enjoying a boom in mill revitalization projects. North of Anthony, the 156-year-old Harris Mill, on Main Street, is being redesigned to become luxury apartments. The former Pawtuxet Valley Dyeing Co. mill, on Lincoln Avenue, was recently renovated into condominium apartments.

The Anthony Mill, along the Pawtuxet, was opened in 1806 by brothers William and Richard Anthony. Initially called the Coventry Manufacturing Company, it was mainly a cotton mill. The original building was a small wooden structure and the business’s growth helped to bring dramatic changes to the agrarian community. A village, mainly of Quakers, sprouted around the mill and a second mill building came up in 1810, larger in structure, some six-stories high.

That building was dismantled in 1873, according to a survey report on Coventry’s historical architecture, said Ted Sanderson, the executive director of the Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission.

Sanderson said town officials are working with a historian on the effort to get Anthony Village on the National Register. He said his office is anticipating an application will be prepared by September. The final decision is in the hands of the National Park Service.

Anthony Village includes some 200 properties, including the Nathanael Greene Homestead.

“We have no doubt that the mill and the village are eligible” for the National Register, Sanderson said.