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Community Commentary
Friday, January 3, 2003

The Belmont Mill is at the heart of this village

By WILLIAM C. JOHNSON

Belmont was born and grew up around this textile mill — much in the way Manchester did around the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company. The mill is embossed on the town's seal; its history interwoven with the family histories of many who live here still. Wallace Rhodes' great-grandmother, Fanny Fuller, worked this mill, toiling long hours for little pay.

On Christmas Day 1868, Fanny Fuller wrote in her diary:

"Very pleasant. Came out of the mill at 3 p.m. Went to a Christmas festival at the hall..."

Bulldozers were literally rumbling around this site in 1995 when Rhodes and the Belmont Historical Society filed an injunction to stop the mill's demolition.

They succeeded. But then they needed to figure out what to do with the building.

Plan New Hampshire helped the people of Belmont figure that out.

Plan New Hampshire is a non-profit organization whose membership includes architects, designers, planners, builders and engineers.

Our members care passionately about New Hampshire's built environment, about its towns and villages and the quality of life in them.

We are all volunteers - loaning professional experience and advice to communities. Far from telling people in communities what to do, we arrive as a group of volunteers asking communities what they want. The first — and perhaps most important thing we do is listen.

In Belmont, as in many other sites around the state, members of Plan New Hampshire collaborated with citizens of Belmont over the course of one intense long weekend to find a series of workable options for the Belmont Mill.

Now, three generations after Fanny Fuller was so pleased to get off work early on Christmas Day, this mill hums with a very different industry.

Where child laborers once worked, little children in a day care center toil over construction paper art projects and the ABCs.

The town's elders gather upstairs at the senior center. The building houses doctor's offices, the Community Action Program, a community meeting room.

On the third floor — hard under the eaves and below the belfry — is a culinary arts training program, and a restaurant run by its students and teachers.

The mill — brought back from dilapidation and the brink of demolition — is again this village's defining feature.

In early December, Plan New Hampshire sent out its annual call for applications to every city and town in New Hampshire — inviting communities to apply for help in planning and conceptual design of projects.

Three projects are selected each year. In recent years, Plan New Hampshire has helped Milan figure out how to expand its elementary school; assisted Newport in creating new uses for the historic Eagle Block Hotel. We also aided Greenfield in planning for a new 24-unit housing facility for the elderly.

We have consulted with towns on libraries, town squares, fire stations, downtown redevelopment and town office design.

The process Plan New Hampshire uses is called a "design charrette."

At a charrette, Plan New Hampshire members and members of a community come together in intensive sessions over the course of one weekend to consider project options. Ideas are laid on the table, picked up, turned over, examined and debated.

Plan New Hampshire extracts ideas from the community — and works from there. Our volunteer architects and landscape designers, builders and planners and engineers take those ideas and create not one plan, but a series of options which a community may choose to implement.

The community is presented with a document outlining those options — complete with site analysis, conceptual architectural drawings, recommendations and cost estimates.

There has never been a time in our state's history when the need for such sound, community based planning was so critical.

New Hampshire is growing at a rate almost unfathomable even two decades ago. The state's population is increasing by about 18,000 people a year. But that only tells part of the story. Physical development is outpacing population growth by a two-to-one ratio. If a town's population increases by 10 percent, development in the same town is increasing by 20 percent over the same period of time.

Plan New Hampshire does not seek to restrict development, but to promote the kind of development that strengthens our communities as they grow. Development does not have to be bad, and it does not have to be sprawl.

It is entirely possible for New Hampshire towns and cities to develop in such a way — as Belmont's village has — that brings communities together instead of fracturing village centers and pushing communities apart.

While Plan New Hampshire can conduct a limited number of design charrettes annually, this very effective practice could be used more widely.

Regional planning commissions and town planning boards could also use

this process that incorporates the ideas of community members and ensures a sense of community ownership over planning and design.

One only needs to walk through the Belmont Mill, here on the banks of the Tioga River, to witness the effectiveness of this kind of deliberate, collaborative community planning. The mill is full of Belmont's children and elders and students and professionals; it is vibrant with services and business. The library, town offices, post office, barber shop and village store are all within walking distance. Surrounding buildings are being improved. The town gazebo stands nearby.

The Belmont Mill is, once again, at the heart of this community. It could have been a parking lot.

For more information about Plan New Hampshire or an application for a community design charrette, contact Plan New Hampshire executive director Mal Merrill, 1-800-721-7526, or go to www.plannh.com

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