Rethinking an old brownfield: Camden’s tannery group gets back to work

By Lynda Clancy | Posted: Wednesday, January 20, 2016 - 3:30pm

CAMDEN — Ideas are starting to flow for what the former Apollo Tannery, on Washington Street, might look like. On Thursday, Jan. 21, the municipally-appointed Tannery Work Group will convene from 4 to 6 p.m., in the Tucker Room at the Camden Opera House to get moving on its charge to "to lead an inclusive, community-wide dialogue to determine the preferred uses of the site."

Members of the group will also finalize their objectives, rank preferences for concepts on the table, and begin planning for how to include the town in the discussion. Ground rules for the group include: "an openness to listening. Everyone has a chance to speak before someone has a second or third opportunity to speak," according to the agenda, which was circulated Jan. 18 by Camden’s community development director Karen Brace.

History of the tannery site, since 2003

"We have been talking about the tannery for years," said Peter Gross, chairman of the Community Economic Development Advisory Committee (http://camdenmaine.gov/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=3559055B-0DC2-47CC-B94E-2C3466C199E9), which was created in 2009 and charged with helping the town sell the 3.5-acre brownfield since cleaned according to state and federal environmental agency guidelines.

He said that at a 2012 Select Board meeting when the town decided to engage someone to actively sell the property.

"It was the initial issue CEDAC took up when it [the municipal committee] was created," he said, speaking to the Camden Select Board Monday evening, Nov. 27, 2012. "The downturn in the economy did not help marketing efforts. The economy seems to picking up. Hopefully we won't go off the fiscal cliff."

The lot at 116 Washington St. has been staring in the town’s fiscal face since 2003 when Camden acquired it in a lien foreclosure, and at the 2011 Camden Town Meeting, it was characterized by one resident as "Camden Follies, Act II."

The Apollo Tannery had closed in 1989, following a fire and financial problems.

But Camden voters agreed to clean it up and attempt to sell it. The town invested close to $1 million, first demolishing the decrepid buildings, carting off some contaminated soil and capping more, hoping the vacant lot would eventually provide the community with a source of enterprise and

The group last met Dec. 8. Members include Ray Andresen, Asger Bagge, Anita Brosius-Scott, Jo Dondis, Stephen Gold, Peter Gross, Roger Moody, Delisa Morong, Craig Mudge, Tom Rosek, Jamie Weymouth, Select Board member Don White, John Arnold, Charlie Jordan and Michael Skaling.

Both Brosius-Scott and Paul Cavalli presented ideas at the Dec. 8 meeting. They included combining on the vacated 3.5 acres a children's playground, public plaza, commercial and townhouse buildings, a sculpture garden, space for the Farmer’s Market and a greenhouse/tropical plant conservatory, with a café.

Other ideas posed involve building a multi-purpose cultural center to incorporate space for screening films, educational and meeting spaces, and a café. Outdoor areas could include green space for community and entertainment activities and the Farmer’s Market.

"Camden has the one-time opportunity to establish itself as "The Destination" for learning, experiences and cultural opportunities that are unique, exciting and could be life changing," wrote Paul Cavalli, as reflected in the minutes, when presenting his ideas for a cultural center. "We are a town with a history of being a center for intellectual, cultural and creative conferences, festivals and events. This is the time for Camden to stake its claim for this..."
employment. The town is still paying off that environmental investment, with annual bond payments of approximately $90,000.

Aside from a brief period in 2006, when a Florida-based investor offered to purchase it for $100,000 (a deal that was terminated), and another deal that soured in 2011 with a film production company, the site of the former Apollo Tannery has held both promise and cost for the town for nine years.

In 2008, another town committee that preceded CEDAC, the Tannery Work Group, recommended the town sell the property in accordance with guiding principles and buyer/developer qualifications. Incentives proposed by the group included supplying a "land for jobs" rebate as a means of encouraging the creation of year-round jobs.

The goals then were far loftier than just divesting the land: the town wanted any potential buyer to create at least 24 new jobs, each paying at least $40,000 in wages and benefits annually.

Furthermore, preference should, according to the town, be given to businesses that would stimulate other new employers to come to Camden without taking customers from any already existing business in the town. A list of acceptable businesses was created, along with a list of those that should not be encouraged in the redeveloped site.

Acceptable businesses included bio-technology and life sciences; research and development; marine trades and boat building; higher education institutions; precision manufacturing and health care. Unacceptable businesses included outdoor boat storage; poultry, meat or seafood processing; auto repair shops and warehouse.

In 2009, CEDAC retained Chris Shrum and the then-Knox-Walco Regional Economic Development Council, with the help of approximately $24,000 in marketing funds, to attract a buyer. At the same time, CEDAC began to focus on its broader mission to help Camden stimulate its economic engine and create year-round employment.

And while those efforts were under way, a group of Camden residents also began working on the idea of a Camden Riverwalk, a pathway that would run along the Megunticook River, and use a portion of the town-owned tannery property that borders the Megunticook River. In 2008, Camden voters had approved creating a 25-foot-wide easement on the tannery land, keeping it forever under the foot of the public.

As the town and CEDAC pushed marketing the tannery site and its land for jobs concept, (http://www.freetandmaine.org/) it placed an ad on Yahoo's financial website in 2010. B.D. Turner Entertainment LLC, whose principals were in Los Angeles and Milwaukee, responded, and pursued acquiring the land, proposing to construct there two sound stages to be used in film production. The deal, as crafted by the town and the LLC principals, became controversial, and LLC pulled out.

Reasons for terminating a purchase and sales agreement were attributed to the overly constrictive land configuration, size, and restrictions affecting title that would make it impossible for the business to develop the studios, adequate parking, office facilities and river improvements.

In 2014, in a close nonbinding vote, Camden residents indicated they wanted the Tannery to be used for purpose. This can happen here. It needs to happen here. And, there is place for it to happen here. It is on the Tannery Site.

The group also appointed Moody as leader.

It was almost one year ago that the Camden Select Board created the group of nine to 11 citizens to help produce recommendations to guide the tannery's future.

At their Feb. 4, 2015 meeting, selectmen agreed to get the Tannery Re-Use Committee established, and then commence a public process similar to that used for the creation of Camden's downtown master plan. That entailed hiring a facilitator to hold community meetings and address ideas as they are posed by citizens.

The Thursday agenda is as follows:

4:00 -- 4:10 Roger – Review December 8 meeting notes, action items and today’s agenda

4:10 – 5 Susanna – Finalize list of objectives; prioritize list of objectives (review prioritization methods)

5:00 – 5:15 Roger – Summarize Concepts to date

5:15 – 5:45 Roger – Planning for Community Process

Purpose of meeting with the community!

Committees, format, timeline

5:45 – 5:56 Reports

5:50 – 6 Roger - Next Steps:

Confirm next meeting day and time — every 3 weeks on a Thursday, 4-6 — lay out schedule:
February 11, March 3, March 24
Agree on items for next meeting’s agenda

Public Comments (brief, 3 minutes or less)

Related stories:

• Camden seeks volunteers to serve on committee deciding tannery's future (https://www.penbaypilot.com/article/camden-seeks-volunteers-serve-committee-guiding-tannery-site-future/48256)

• Camden leaders put tannery issue before voters (http://www.penbaypilot.com/article/camden-leaders-put-tannery-question-out-voters/39654)

• Leaders say enough is enough with Camden’s problem property (http://www.penbaypilot.com/article/camden-leaders-put-tannery-question-out-voters/39654)
commercial/business purposes. The question on the ballot was: "Do you support using the Tannery property for commercial/business uses described in the Guiding Principles approved by the Town Meeting, or do you support using the Tannery property for park/open space?"

1,429 said they wanted it kept for commercial/business use
1,380 said they wanted it used as park/open space

Renewed interest in the parcel arose in 2014 following the North East Mobile Health Services decision to withdraw from real estate negotiations on the property. On Aug. 29, the for-profit ambulance service announced that it was backing out of talks with Camden to purchase and redevelop the former Apollo Tannery property, which has stood vacant since 2005. The Select Board then agreed to put a nonbinding referendum on the Nov. 4 ballot. They had all been hopeful that the town would finally be able to transfer the brownfield property to the ambulance service. A group of local residents, however, had been objecting to the siting of the ambulance service there.

The town had agreed on existing guidelines attached to the sale of the tannery property, the "Land for Jobs" campaign. The town voted several years ago in an attempt to sell the property.

Those guiding principles were approved in June 2008 at Town Meeting.

- Camden Select Board to discuss tannery sale to North East (http://www.penbaypilot.com/article/camden-select-board-discuss-possible-sale-tannery-property-north-east-mobile-health-services)
- Clearing up misconceptions, rumors:

Camden, Hope, Lincolnville, Rockport heading to town meeting, tackle complicated EMS vote (http://www.penbaypilot.com/article/clearing-misconceptions-rumors-camden-hope-lincolnville-rockport-heading-town-meeting-tackle)

- Camden’s Riverwalk takes shape where once a tannery stood (http://www.penbaypilot.com/article/camden-s-riverwalk-takes-shape-where-once-tannery-stood/22568)