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Berkshire Co-op plans major expansion in Great Barrington



Art Ames

An architectural rendering of the proposed new development at the former New England Log Homes site.

Former New England Log Home site selected for new and enlarged facility

By Emily Kramer

GREATBARRINGTON — With the approval of its Board last week, the Berkshire Co-op Market has entered negotiations with a joint venture between the Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire and Allegrone Construction to explore the possibility of building a new store on the former New England Log Homes site on Bridge Street.

The Co-op Market is currently located at 42 Bridge Street, and according to General Manager Art Ames, "we've run out of parking."

It's not just the parking issue, however. A highly

successful business, the Co-op Market moved to its current location eight years ago, and has now out-grown its 4,500 square feet. "We moved in [to the current location] when we were at \$1.5 million per year. And the day we moved in, I told my staff that we were going to outgrow this so fast, their heads would spin," said Ames, "And now that we're at \$8.3 million, we really can't be any more efficient with our space."

"It's not just about more revenue," he continued, "it's about meeting our owners needs... We sell groceries to support our mission, and one of those

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[missions] is to help create a more self-sufficient community." As any visitor to the Co-op Market could tell you, the Market is all about sustainable, local, organic food. And they could also probably tell you, it's usually packed.

For Ames, the new location fits in beautifully with the Market's mission. "We don't want to grow, just for sake of expansion; we want smart growth. We want a location that will not only work for us for the long term, but also for the community. And while it may seem like an odd choice for a co-op, it actually makes a lot of sense."

It looks like an odd choice, because the former New England Log Homes site is what is known as a "brown site." According to Tim Geller, the Executive Director of the CDC, because of the nature of the former businesses on that property, the ground has been contaminated with dioxins from burning textile waste and PCPs from the creosote used in constructing the log homes.

The site will be cleaned up before any construction

begins on the eight acre site, but there are a few options for the method, according to Geller.

Much like what has been proposed for the Housatonic River, all of the contaminated soil could be removed and disposed of elsewhere, or the ground could be "capped," which would seal the contaminates into the ground and away from contact with people. The removal option is considerably more expensive, at an estimated \$20 million, while the capping option would be a much easier sum of \$7 million. But there could be a third option. Both Geller and Ames were excited about the possibility of "bio-remediation," or what Geller called a "farming" method, where microorganisms are encouraged to breakdown and absorb the pollutants at a faster rate than is natural. "We'll know in couple of months if this is a viable option," said Ames.

Ames and Geller are optimistic that Geller can get the permits in place and break ground by the fall of 2013. And Ames is even hoping for a possible opening in October of 2014. "Mind you, that's pie in the sky," he said.

For both Ames and Geller, the truly exciting part of this new venture is not just the fact that a locally-focused business has out-grown its location; it's the implications for the larger community. "This property [the former New England Log Homes site] has been off the tax rolls for about 20 years," said Geller. "This is actually the last place where we can expand the downtown area without creating a strip."

"It's a beautiful area, right along the river. There isn't another place like that in Great Barrington, or even in South County, I think, where there can be public space right along the Housatonic," said Ames. And when Ames says "public space," he means it. According to the plans, there will be a large swath of river bank devoted to public use, along with room for ancillary business to grow up around the Co-op Market. Ames even dreams of having concerts there in the summer.

"We're very excited about the possibilities here," said Ames, "We think it could be model for private/public cooperation, even beyond our area."