

## Asheville, North Carolina: Historic Cotton Mill

### Creating a New Urban Fabric: Asheville Weaves Brownfields into Regional Development Plans

Nestled in the scenic mountains of western North Carolina, the eclectic city of Asheville offers a wealth of environmental, artistic, and cultural treasures. The city's charms are no secret and in recent years droves of visitors and retirees have decided to make Asheville a seasonal base, fueling the area's booming second home market. Yet, Asheville is a land of contrasts. While housing developers busily carve away at virgin hillsides, older sections of the city languish—particularly former industrial lands situated along the French Broad River. Although tensions between growth and environmental preservation continue to mount, community leaders believe that long-range, integrated planning efforts are producing acceptable compromises that will capture the benefits of growth while preserving the assets that make the region special.

For over twenty years community groups have been conducting planning and visioning exercises for Asheville's riverfront. One of the most active groups is RiverLink, a non-profit organization which encourages environmental protection and economic prosperity along the French Broad River. Not only does the organization educate the public about water quality and economic revitalization issues, it also spearheads comprehensive planning efforts. The Wilma Dykeman Riverway Plan, a document which presents development and design guidelines for 17 miles of Asheville's riverfront, examines issues such as land use, signage, transportation, public art, landscaping, and opportunities for health. It is one of RiverLink's many important accomplishments. Adopted by the City of Asheville and Buncombe County, the plan serves as a vision for the riverfront's revitalization and has even been incorporated into local zoning codes. Despite RiverLink's regional focus, some of the organization's most important work takes place in its own backyard, the River Arts District, a neighborhood in transition populated by artists and other diverse groups.

Several years ago RiverLink purchased a key site within the River Arts District, a dilapidated and contaminated but culturally relevant former cotton mill. At one time a beautiful, historic building,



arsonists destroyed much of the structure about 10 years ago. The mill's remains sit prominently within the district, visible from above to the thousands of motorists who enter the city each day from the Interstate 240 Bridge. The cotton mill property covers less than three acres, but community leaders deem the site to be one of the most important parcels in the entire riverfront revitalization effort. By showcasing the mill within the region's broader redevelopment effort, planning participants hope to set a precedent for high-quality infill development along the riverfront that meets the community's needs and celebrates Asheville's unique character.

#### *The Historic Cotton Mill*

Although the River Arts District offers a lot of exciting redevelopment potential, several years have passed since initial visioning efforts for the neighborhood. Over the past 10 years RiverLink has celebrated many accomplishments, including the establishment of four community parks and the purchase of a handful of dilapidated buildings, but the region's most important site, the cotton mill, has remained vacant. Recently, however, RiverLink refocused its attention on the site and with the

help of the Land-of-Sky Regional Council's (LOSRC) Brownfields Initiative, entered it into North Carolina's Brownfields Program, run by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). The program is helping to facilitate redevelopment of the cotton mill by providing assistance with remediation and liability issues. In 2006 DENR finalized the site's Brownfields Agreement after environmental analyses had been completed, and efforts to secure a developer are well underway. But the clock continues to tick as community members in the River Arts District face intensifying threats from vandalism and robbery. Now RiverLink confronts the challenge of bringing stabilizing redevelopment to the community while transforming the district into a destination where diverse groups of people wish to "work, live, and play".

### **The River Arts District and Historic Cotton Mill Site**



*View of the Cotton Mill*

Located in the River Arts District, one of seven districts highlighted for revitalization in the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Plan, the historic cotton mill and surrounding neighborhood have a rich history. Built in the 1890s, the cotton mill was a gorgeous building of 122,000 square feet, with arched brick windows and pine wood floors. The mill manufactured uniforms for soldiers during the First and Second World Wars and was one of the first places to make denim. Up until the mill ceased operations in the 1950s, the area surrounding the site was a traditional mill village, which included a mill store and neighborhood housing for the workers. When the mill closed the building was

used for storage and warehousing and began decaying over time. Unfortunately, a week-long fire caused by arsonists in the spring of 1995 reduced this historic building to two burnt-out structures with very little left to salvage.

Today the River Arts District is populated primarily by artists who rent or own live-work space in the neighborhood. However, people from working class backgrounds, young professionals, and some of the city's very poorest residents live in communities within and surrounding the district, including some who live without electricity or public water services. In addition to these community members, the neighborhood is frequented by large numbers of transients. Residents note that the number of homeless persons has increased substantially since Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and wonder if this is more than coincidence. Frequently the transients seek shelter in abandoned areas of the neighborhood including the cotton mill and an adjacent derelict site. However, these buildings are not structurally sound and have been deemed unsafe by the fire department.

As the homeless population has grown, residents have witnessed an increase in crime, including vandalism, robbery, and even violent threats. One community member confesses that she has even thought about moving recently. She wonders, "Am I taking my own life in my hands by living here?" The district also struggles with illegal activities such as prostitution and has acquired a bad reputation with residents from other areas of the city. Despite these problems the artist community has been flourishing. RiverLink hopes that redevelopment of the cotton mill will help stabilize the neighborhood and foster a mixed income community that will attract new residents and visitors.

Environmental issues have surrounded the riverfront for many years. Once a dumping ground for a variety of pollutants, the area's industries and residents now understand that the French Broad will eventually become the region's primary drinking water source and water quality has improved

dramatically. RiverLink has worked hard to change the public's attitudes regarding the river. RiverLink's Executive Director explains, "The joke around here was you could smell it before you could see it...The idea that people would recreate on the river twenty years ago was sort of suspended belief!...That is no longer the case."

In addition to water quality issues, the River Arts District faces another environmental challenge—some of the area's old industrial sites, including the cotton mill, are contaminated. Before redevelopment can take place,

RiverLink needs to remediate pollutants found on site, which include small spots of oil and grease in the soil as well as tetrachloroethylene—a chemical often associated with dry cleaning and metal degreasing operations—in the groundwater. Although contamination is minimal, the North Carolina Brownfields program is providing important support to RiverLink by giving technical assistance for the site's remediation and providing a release of liability to all future owners. Once remediation activities have been completed, RiverLink will be able to move forward and bring new development to the site.



*The French Broad River*

Brownfields redevelopment participants are looking forward to welcoming new development on the site and believe that the mill's revitalization will foster expansion of the artistic community. Although a public involvement process specifically targeting the cotton mill has not yet been held, Executive Director Karen Cragolin shares her preliminary plans for the site: "Oh, it's real clear. First floor is parking. Second floor and third floor is probably retail and commercial and the rest of it...is residential." Although subsidized artist studios will be available, RiverLink also hopes to introduce some upscale residential development, such as luxury condos, into the area to increase the mix of income levels. Cragolin hopes to combat the problems caused by a concentration of poverty in the area. She remarks, "You put all the poor people together and wonder why you get problems." With more than twenty years in the community, RiverLink has the tools and awareness to bring quality redevelopment to the River Arts District and to involve a broad cross section of the community in the process.

### **Public Participation: Promising Approaches and Future Opportunities**

RiverLink prides itself with extensively engaging and educating the public about environmental and economic development issues. The organization employs a wide variety of approaches to target diverse groups of citizens such as holding monthly "salons" where various topics are presented, hosting imaginary yacht club events, and featuring monthly meet-and-greet activities. In addition, staff members create a 12-page newspaper insert every six months that reaches over 160,000 people. RiverLink also organizes formal opportunities for citizens to participate in planning and visioning activities, as it did for the creation of the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Plan. Community members were invited to participate in design charettes, focus groups, and public hearings, which were aired by a local radio station.

Although RiverLink has not facilitated a public involvement process for the cotton mill site specifically, the organization did meet posting requirements put forth by the North Carolina

Brownfields Program. Potential brownfields applicants are required to post signage on-site as well as submit notices inviting questions or comments to the state register and a local newspaper. However, it is not common for applicants to receive much feedback from these postings and RiverLink was no exception. Cragnolin notes, "Well we didn't get one comment about the cotton mill...and I think some of that is that we've been doing all this for twenty years that there aren't too many people who are somewhat engaged that don't have a feeling for what it is we're trying to do with the cotton mill and how we see that as...sort of being the impetus for further development in setting the standard."

Community members have been learning about the cotton mill site and the brownfields program from other sources, including LOSRC and DENR. For example, LOSRC issued special press releases when the site was entered into the brownfields program as well as general press releases to advertise new funding availability for brownfields redevelopment. Additionally, the organization features a website which features pictures of the cotton mill. LOSRC also has created a brownfields advisory group which includes regional stakeholders such as bankers, real estate professionals, environmental consultants, property owners, and others who regularly meet to discuss issues surrounding brownfields in the community. Finally, DENR also spreads the word about brownfields projects and employs staff members who are eager to meet with the public to discuss opportunities in the program or answer questions about specific sites. DENR employee Tracy Wahl explains, "If anybody asks, I will come and talk to you [and] give you all the information that I can."

Despite RiverLink's impressive history of creative community involvement activities, some community members are not satisfied with how the organization handles public participation. One very active community member who knows "a lot of what's going on in this neighborhood" claims that until recently she knew very little about brownfields and was not given an opportunity to share ideas and concerns regarding the cotton mill's redevelopment. Additionally, although there were extensive planning efforts for the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Plan, she felt that there was not adequate public notification regarding planning activities and very little feedback once planning had been completed. This struggle regarding the quality of communication has been going on for almost 10 years. Fortunately, however, LOSRC has been reaching out to community members and trying to assist RiverLink with public awareness activities.

In addition to having concerns about the adequacy of RiverLink's community involvement and notification efforts, some community members are cautious about the organization's desire to include luxury housing. Residents are also worried that RiverLink will give preference to developers who propose large-scale projects, although Executive Director Cragnolin claims that citizens have misinterpreted their goals. One resident expresses a preference for taking an organic approach to development: "My goal is always for smaller projects just where an individual is pursuing their vision within a greater goal rather than a big player coming in and dictating to the neighborhood." Community member Pattiy Torno shares her vision for the River Arts District:

*"The most important thing to me is that we create an urban fabric in this neighborhood...the temptation for your riverfront is to use it as seldom visited recreational use...but the problem with that is that at this point this section of road it's where the...[prostitutes] come, it's where the drug dealers come, it's where the homeless folks come...what ever building happens has to address a 24-hour, 7-days a week, 365 days a year presence because that's the only way that...this particular section of our riverfront is going to be safe again."*

RiverLink has not announced whether it will conduct a new participation process focusing on the cotton mill to augment general feedback which was received for the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Plan. The cotton mill's artist community neighbors are full of opinions and are hopeful that they will be invited to discuss their specific concerns and goals for development at the site. However, other neighbors, many of whom are disadvantaged, may have opinions as well. Fortunately, should RiverLink choose to conduct a formal involvement process for the site, the organization has the tools to reach out to a variety of citizens in neighboring areas, including disadvantaged populations. Executive Director Karen Cragolin explains, "That segment of the community I would say is just in general pretty disenfranchised. We found that if you want participation you have to go to them...You can't necessarily think you're going to reach people with...an article or a TV interview or a radio interview. I mean there are days when...you just need to go knock on the door."

### **Bringing the Mill Back to Life: Lessons for Moving Forward**

With help from the Land-of-Sky Regional Council, Asheville is heavily promoting brownfields redevelopment as a tool to address issues of growth and urban deterioration in the region. The cotton mill is one of the region's highest priority sites and RiverLink is working hard to share its redevelopment expertise and experiences in the brownfields program with the broader Asheville community. Already the organization has assisted four other River District property owners to enter their sites into the program and several more projects may be on the way. However, Cragolin has witnessed obstacles in increasing the number of local brownfields redevelopment projects: "One of the problems that I think you have in engaging a property owner in the brownfields program in an area like this, they're afraid of government. They're terrified of government. They don't know exactly what they're sitting on. Whatever it is, they think that's their pension. And granddaddy did what he did and it was okay then...It's a huge barrier. And that's why we took the cotton mill through it first and we've been sharing our paperwork with other interested parties."



*RiverLink's Headquarters*

In addition to educating the community about brownfields and transforming the way Asheville approaches riverfront redevelopment, Cragolin sees RiverLink's work with the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Plan and the cotton mill as much broader in scale than a local revitalization effort. She explains, "This urban riverfront, for us, is the living classroom for the watershed and what we're trying to do here we hope we can...get this done and then replicate that in other communities." Sharing knowledge and practices with other communities will ensure a greater level of environmental, economic, and aesthetic success for the region and beyond.

Although RiverLink works tirelessly at reaching out to the community and sharing its experiences with others, some of its closest neighbors wish for more targeted opportunities to give feedback. Hosting an open house or similar meeting specifically for discussing issues surrounding the cotton mill would be a good way to open communication channels and repair or maintain the organization's good standing in the community. The organization has struggled at times with the issue of how many public involvement activities to offer. RiverLink's Cragolin explains, "We just do a lot of stuff...to engage the community. Sometimes I wonder if we do too much stuff." One strategy could be to reduce the frequency of broad scale, on-going participation activities while increasing the amount of localized, casual, and neighborly contact for those in the River Arts

District. Although RiverLink assumes that the lack of community comments from the brownfields posting means that interested neighbors already know what's going on, it may be that truly invested neighbors were not aware of the opportunities to submit comments. However, this project's tensions demonstrate that regardless how hard an organization tries, it is nearly impossible to craft a public participation effort that fully satisfies all community members. RiverLink deserves recognition for its innovative, thoughtful public outreach efforts as well as its receptiveness to try new approaches.

Despite some disappointment from local residents regarding public participation, there are many reasons to expect that RiverLink will lead an impressive redevelopment effort at the cotton mill site which will support public goals. First of all, during the development of the Wilma Dykeman Riverway Plan the organization became intimately aware of the preferences of a variety of different sectors of the community and allowed these voices to guide the plan's development. Furthermore, RiverLink has the support of local government bodies such as the LOSRC. Since building on the site has not yet begun, RiverLink also has the opportunity to increase the level of public participation and ensure that the site's closest neighbors feel adequately involved. Finally, redevelopment participants have a variety of creative ideas which will make the revitalization effort unique and keep the site's history alive, such as using the mill's original undamaged brick as façade on new structures.

Although it is just one site in a larger redevelopment effort, the cotton mill is much more than an isolated brownfields project. From setting the precedent for high quality redevelopment to increasing the diversity of incomes in the neighborhood to reducing crime, the cotton mill's redevelopment is a key starting point for revitalization in the River Arts District. Despite a long process, the absence of a targeted in-depth planning process, and the fact that construction has not yet begun, participants continue to focus on the site's potential. LOSRC's Brownfields Specialist Holly Bullman sums up her hope for the site: "I think that the cotton mill offers us that chance to kind of connect the past to the present and give people both an environmental education and historical education about our region, too." As the redevelopment effort continues to pick up steam, the River Arts District will soon begin crafting a new identity for itself—one that preserves the old, welcomes the new, and is authentic to Asheville all the way through.