

The Buffalo News

Hopes Rise for Historic Buildings

Developer Looks to Take On Williamsville, Amherst Landmarks

By Sandra Tan
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Run-down historic buildings always are a problem. They're important to the community but expensive to fix, hard to adapt and a drain on taxpayers. Amherst and Williamsville have reluctantly sat on two of them for years.

Now, the man who redeveloped one of the most iconic structures on the Buffalo skyline hopes to acquire two of the region's oldest buildings, recasting the dilapidated Williamsville Water Mill and Mennonite Meeting House as profitable enterprises.

"That's the trick," said Amherst-based developer Paul Bohdan Iskalo. "That's the art. That's why projects are difficult. Because they not only have to be respectful to their historical nature and to the community, but be a building that businesses can thrive in long term."

Iskalo is best known for his ambitious, award-winning renovation of the white, octagonal Electric Tower landmark in downtown Buffalo. He bought his first commercial property as a college student and has developed or redeveloped dozens of high-profile properties since.

Now at 44, Iskalo plans to add significantly to that legacy.



The Williamsville Water Mill, pictured in this file photo, has been re-imagined as everything from a youth hostel and museum to a banquet facility in recent years. (Harry Scull Jr., The Buffalo News File Photo)

Request for offers

The Village of Williamsville now owns the 1811 Williamsville Water Mill, the economic spark for developing the village and one of the oldest standing structures in the entire region.

Amherst uses the Mennonite Meeting House, a community fixture at Main Street and North Forest Road since 1834, to store town records.

Both are in disrepair -- with peeling paint to buckling walls -- and owned by governments that don't have the money, resources or will in hard economic times to sink hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars into their restoration.

Elected officials asked for offers, and Iskalo made them.

Earlier this month, the Williamsville Village Board voted unanimously to enter into negotiations with Iskalo Development for the eventual acquisition and redevelopment of the water mill parcel adjacent to Glen Park off East Spring Street.

The mill has been a source of controversy, concern and taxpayer heartburn ever since the village hastily bought it for \$450,000 in 2004. It's been re-imagined as everything from a youth hostel and museum to a banquet facility.

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But it has remained a deteriorating and fire-damaged structure with gorgeous views of Glen Park, a broken tin sluice and dusty gear wheels on the ground level.

Jeffrey Kingsley, a village trustee and chairman of the Mill Restoration Committee, said he suspects that, including legal and consulting costs, the village has spent close to \$1 million on acquiring, repairing and maintaining the building.

"We didn't go through a two-year process to select a proposal that we believe is not a workable one," Kingsley said. "We will do everything in our power to make this a success. Are there details that have to be worked out? Absolutely."

Jason Yots, a preservation consultant to the village, said having the involvement of a firm like Iskalo Development is key to the project's success.

"This is a historic preservation project, but it's also a real estate project," he said. "And it's a real estate project that's going to occur two years into a recession. They're a bankable group. They can get a project financed."

'Destination project'

The village is expected to formally tap Iskalo Development as its preferred developer next month, but the

company will have another six months to put together a viable business and financing plan before finalizing its commitment. Construction would not start until at least 2012.

But the concept of what the mill property will eventually become already has been fleshed out to some extent, and Iskalo Development has bought into the initial vision.

At the last board meeting, village leaders heard plans to make the mill a "destination project," with a restaurant, bar or boutique inn possible on the main level; a museum component for the lower ground floor; and office space for the second floor.

A landscaped public plaza ideal for the village's farmers' market would surround the mill, while new buildings would flank the mill to expand the property's marketable space for tenants. The historic structure would also have a direct pedestrian connection to Glen Park.

But the property still has space and parking constraints, historic preservation and park restrictions, and only 20,000 square feet of roughly 30,000 total square feet available to command market rent.

In its proposal, Iskalo Development asked the village to deed the mill to the company

for free and stated that the company may need to seek up to an additional \$1.5 million in public incentives to make its financial plan workable.

Kingsley said he does not expect village taxpayers to provide much, if any, of the money. Even so, he said, "I'm not going to sugar coat it; it's a very complicated transaction."

Iskalo seems undaunted.

The Village Board's investment in stabilizing the building and putting forth a financially feasible design concept gives him some security, he said.

"There are some very good things that have already been vetted on paper," he said, "and that's where we're going to start."

'Passion for adaptive reuse'

By comparison, redeveloping the 2,000-square-foot Mennonite Meeting House, with its open floor plan, might look like a walk in the park.

Pennsylvania Dutch farmers erected the square stone building on the northwest corner of Main and North Forest. It served as a church until the early 1980s and was designated a national landmark in 2005.

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Renovated as a town archives facility in 1995, the building is beset with peeling paint, rotting window and door frames, and a patch-covered roof. Town administrators estimate it needs \$135,000 in exterior repairs.

Iskalo has gotten a daily, up-close look at the building's gradual deterioration because his development office at Harbinger Square -- the first building he bought as a college student -- sits next door.

"It's right here," he said, extending his arm to the right. "It's this great stone building; it's 100-plus years old. I've got to believe we can come up with

a use that's better than what it's been used for for the last 10-plus years."

Iskalo has built a number of new buildings from the ground up, his most recent project being the 21,000-square-foot brick building at 2780 Delaware Ave. in Kenmore. But given the choice, he said, he prefers to help a faded building live up to its true calling.

"I've always had a passion for adaptive reuse," he said. "That's where I started."

Iskalo said he had expressed a desire to buy the Mennonite Meeting House for years. But

this is the first year the Amherst Town Board has actively solicited bids on the property.

Iskalo submitted the only proposal and ultimately agreed to buy the building for \$225,000 after the town negotiated up the price. A purchase contract is in the works. Amherst Supervisor Barry A. Weinstein said the proceeds from the sale will go directly into a preservation fund to care for the town's remaining historic structures.

Iskalo Development has suggested that the building could be used for office space, a retail boutique shop or cafe-style restaurant.