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\$40 million makeover proposed for Conover site

Charlotte Business Journal - July 27, 2007 by [Ken Elkins](#) Staff writer

The city of Conover and a developer are considering a former furniture plant near downtown for a \$40 million project.

The result could be a New Urbanism village featuring a mix of uses -- or something completely different.

"The market will dictate what the unmet needs are," says Jerry Deakle, managing partner of The Brownfield Real Estate Co., a Raleigh- and Winston-Salem-based developer specializing in bringing new life to former industrial sites.

The company, which serves as master developer of the city-owned site, has a five-year option to buy the 27-acre tract, which was home to a Broyhill Furniture Industries plant until April 2005.

Chances are the triangular-shaped site will become a community that combines retail, residential and office uses, says Q. Lance Hight, Conover's interim planning director. "We think it will be a mixed-use urban infill," he says.

City leaders would like to see the site restored as a center for manufacturing jobs, Hight says. "Nothing's off the table."

Scott Millar, president of Catawba County Economic Development Corp., says local hopes for industrial jobs aren't unrealistic, despite the departure of so many of the county's furniture and textile jobs in recent years.

"We're looking for a broad range of potential users, ranging from mixed-use, service, light manufacturing and technology jobs," he says.

The city of Conover can control development at the site, located on Third Street Northwest near U.S. Highway 70, because it bought it from Broyhill for \$500,000 shortly after the plant closed.

"We didn't want a manufacturing facility that would sit deteriorating and become a blight on our community," Hight says.

The property is near the shops of downtown Conover and the Concordia neighborhood, developed in the 1930s.

Brownfield executives like the project because of its setting. City planners have taken steps to protect downtown and put city offices near its commercial district.

"The city has great curb appeal," Deakle says.

The timeline for the project is vague until further planning can be done. Demolition could start later this year if the project is a go.

The redevelopment will likely require four years to complete, unless an anchor tenant steps forward, Deakle says. "If a client comes in, we could compress that time period significantly."

Redevelopment of the site will likely preserve the 89-year-old former Warlong Glove factory. It's a 15,000-square-foot, two-story building that may be the only structure worth saving in a 220,000-square-foot complex.

"It would be used as a feature, as a brand for the site," Deakle says.

Hight calls the Warlong building a potential cornerstone for the development, a reminder of the area's roots in the production of apparel and textiles.

Its wooden and steel beams and oak flooring could be cleaned, creating space for a large office operation or even a retail center, he says.

The flooring in the long-closed glove factory is deeply worn in foot-sized depressions. Deakle believes they were made by the feet of sewing-machine operators as they made glove after glove.

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At its peak of production, the Broyhill plant had 350 employees for its wood and upholstery operations.

An environmental evaluation has found few pollution problems at the site, Deakle says. Some underground tank sites will have to be remediated, along with places where the soil is contaminated from solvents used in cleaning wooden furniture before it was stained or painted.

An architect will study the site to see if any of a dozen buildings other than the glove factory should be saved.

A public hearing will be conducted to air ideas about the site's redevelopment. No date has been set.

Several big expenditures related to the project are looming, Deakle says. Among them, a market study will cost \$35,000, and a master plan is priced at about \$175,000. Redevelopment costs are expected to be as much as \$40 million.

Deakle expects Conover to retain ownership of the property during the first few years to attract grant money and other funding, for which a developer such as Brownfield wouldn't qualify.

Conover or Brownfield could opt to add about 20 adjacent acres to square off the site and better control development in the area.

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