

## **Conover Station: A community-based, sustainable, downtown Brownfield redevelopment**

Conover's downtown, like so many others across North Carolina, once buzzed with factories producing furniture and textiles. Workers kept the local restaurants, stores and offices busy. Unemployment was low and steady growth was commonplace. However, today the economic landscape has dramatically changed. We have witnessed the continuing decline of manufacturing and staggering losses in employment. It has become all too common over the past decade to hear of the closing of another factory. One such factory was Broyhill Furniture in Conover. Once a fixture in the downtown; they closed their doors in 2004, leaving over 400 workers without a job and 400,000+ square feet of vacant, obsolete factory space. Shortly thereafter the City of Conover, with a fear of what could become of a site so prominent in the downtown, took a proactive approach by purchasing the 27 acre property.

From early on, public input was sought from the community. Conover started with surveys and focus groups seeking opinions on the future of the site. A day-long public workshop was held in a downtown shopfront building, complete with hamburgers, hotdogs, maps and markers. Over time, a vision for the site was crafted into a master plan. The vision was truly comprehensive and expansive in nature; to pave the way for quality redevelopment that will help revitalize the downtown, meet future transportation needs, empower entrepreneurs and manufacturers, improve the environment, preserve local heritage and be a source of community pride. It was clear that Conover, a city of around 8,000 residents and like so many other cities struggling through a time of ever constricting budgets, would not have the means necessary to facilitate such a vision alone.

The city enlisted experts in the fields of architecture, engineering and environmental and historic analysis. Architects and engineers determined that the factory, which was actually one building with over twenty additions ranging from 1945 till 1990, was structurally deficient and cost prohibitive to redevelop. Subsequently, the majority of the buildings on the site were demolished, with the exception of the two oldest, a 1918 textile mill and a 1945 furniture finishing building. Environmental Engineers tested the site and found minor soil and ground water contamination. The city pursued and received a Brownfield designation for the site.

To make the vision a reality, Conover has taken a methodical and pragmatic approach. The question is how to reinvent a former factory site into a thriving engine for the city. The answer to the question has been vision, strong political support and a lot of grant funding.

- With the Brownfield site designation, Conover applied for and received an EPA grant for \$200,000 to remediate the on-site contaminants. The work began in September 2010 and monitoring will continue into the future.

The site is bordered by 1,600 feet of active railroad line. Conover lies along NCDOT Rail's future Western Passenger Rail Corridor that runs from Salisbury to Asheville. In 2008, in coordination with NCDOT Rail Division Staff, Conover was named as a designated stop along the future passenger rail line for Catawba County. With this, Conover envisioned an opportunity to create a multimodal transit center by repurposing the oldest building on the site. In working with the Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority, Conover insured the fixed bus route would service this site, and offered administrative office space to the authority staff in the building.

- Conover applied for and received Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funding for \$2,146,200. These funds will renovate the mill building into a multi-use, multimodal transit center. In addition to the transit uses, the LEED Certified rehab will also house the Conover Branch Library on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, a coffee/pastry shop and a 270 seat community/conference room on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor. The building is scheduled for completion in summer of 2011.

Though in the heart of the city, the 27 acre site needed several infrastructure improvements to adequately support its future planned uses.

- Conover applied for and was awarded a \$735,000 in Economic Development Initiatives funding. This grant is funding water, sewer, street and sidewalk improvements on the site. The street was designed with over 180 on-street parking spaces, with almost half being within the railroad right of way. This will allow for shared parking possibilities, reduce the amount of off-street parking needed and maximize the buildable area. Work is wrapping up now and should be finalized November 2010.

The region, still suffering from the decline of the once strong manufacturing base, has hard decisions to make; we accept the current situation and chalk it up as a loss, or work diligently to adapt and utilize the ingenuity and work ethic that made the area a manufacturing success. Conover is doing the latter and is fighting to prepare for the future. In 2009, Conover met another group that has this same mentality. An invaluable partnership was formed. The Manufacturing Solutions Center (MSC) is a facility with strong staff that believes that innovation and technology can help foster a diverse manufacturing environment. Born from the Catawba Valley Community College, MSC has been working for over a decade to assist industries, both locally and nationally through materials testing, streamlining design and manufacturing innovations. The MSC has outgrown their current facility and is seeking to expand their existing operations, as well as offer a new opportunity for "launch pad" spaces for burgeoning technology entrepreneurs.

This partnership was a perfect marriage for the City and MSC, as the City has land available for development at Conover Station.

- Along with the Manufacturing Solutions Center, Conover applied for and received \$2,700,000 in funding to go toward a new city-owned, MCS-occupied facility at Conover Station. This funding consists of \$1,000,000 from N.C. Commerce Department, \$1,500,000 from the U.S. Commerce Department and \$200,000 from the Golden Leaf Foundation of N.C.

Throughout the project, Conover has strived to be responsible stewards of the environment. Through the demolition of the buildings over 23,000 tons of brick, block and concrete were saved. These materials were crushed and recycled as fill material for road beds. All suitable timbers from the buildings were saved and repurposed as furniture by a Virginia furniture company. The multimodal station will be a LEED certified building, complete with a rainwater harvesting and reuse system. On the site you will find the head waters for McLin Creek and the low point for a 70 acre watershed that includes approximately half of the existing downtown. Conover saw this as a once in a lifetime opportunity.

- Conover applied for and received a \$415,000 North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund Grant. This grant will fund a stormwater wetland structure on the Conover Station site that will provide improved water quality and be the centerpiece of a new environmentally-themed and educational public park along the Carolina Thread Trail.

Conover has leveraged a variety of funding sources to help the vision of Conover Station come closer to being a reality. Totalling over \$6.2 million in funding received to date, Conover Station is bustling with construction activity. The City hopes to offer the remaining acreage, approximately 18 acres, for private development in coming months. An invaluable tool through the entire process has been Google Sketchup software. Planning Staff has used Sketchup to create a full modeling of the site including buildings and streetscape concepts. These tools have allowed Staff to illustrate the overall vision to numerous individuals in a matter of seconds. Staff has posted Sketchup video "tours" on the City's Youtube page and Facebook page, as well as still images on Flickr. Conover believes that the Conover Station project can serve as an example of how gaining citizen and political support along with community vision and determination can transform liabilities into assets and help underutilized properties prosper. For more information contact Lance Hight, Planning Director, City of Conover.