



Creative Escape is located in a building owned by the Eaton Rapids Development Corp. on Hall Street in downtown Eaton Rapids. GREG DERUITER/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

RIVERFRONT REVAMP

Group looks to make Eaton Rapids bigger draw

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EATON RAPIDS — The riverfront property on Hall Street may not look like much at first glance.

The vacant lots and underutilized buildings situated there may not paint a vibrant picture. But take a ride with Jamie Davidson and Don Wyckoff, stakeholders in the Eaton Rapids Development Corp., and they will outline a clear vision for the site and other property along the waterfront in Eaton Rapids.

"This is the time," Davidson said of the ERDC's push for redevelopment, as he describes a boardwalk that would bring residents and visitors to a riverfront alive with destination-type businesses.

The development group plans to start by revaroping two buildings near North Main Street in the northeastern section of downtown, with occupancy possible in the first half of 2013. The Hall Street project, which investors think might work as a mixed-use development, ideally would follow a year later.

The ERDC was formed in 2010. It is comprised of 35 investors who have already spent an estimated \$250,000 on their vision for the city, mostly through property acquisition and building upgrades.

The group owns three buildings and three vacant lots situated on riverfront property in Eaton Rapids. Investors, most of whom are local, each contributed a minimum of \$5,000 to the effort. Gary Wichman, a local resident and the group's president, wouldn't name the principals but said they represent local sectors that range from manufacturing and construction to education and health care.



Charles Ross (left), Elizabeth VanAken and Bessie Bray work on their pottery at Creative Escape in downtown Eaton Rapids.

"They have interest in Eaton Rapids and have interest in seeing Eaton Rapids move forward," Wichman said. "They also surely see the investment opportunity."

Big plans

Wichman helped the late Paul DiMeglio start the group. The former Tetra Corp. president and CEO died last fall in a high-speed traffic crash in Hamlin Township, but the ERDC has forged ahead.

Wichman said the block of Hall Street that runs along the Spring Brook has untapped potential, something the ERDC also thought when it bought the C.J. Moore Buildings and three empty parcels along the stretch.

"From the beginning, we have envisioned a multi-use

THE PROPERTIES

Some of the parcels the Eaton Rapids Development Corp. owns:

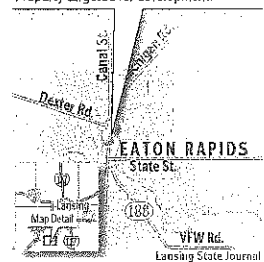
- » 204 N. Main St.
- » 114 Mill St.
- » 142 Hall St.
- » 116 and 124 Hall St.

development, a combination of retail and community-oriented businesses," Wichman said.

Off Mill Street and along the Grand River is an abandoned house ERDC owns. It is located near the site that has been chosen for Eaton Rapids' new white water rapids, where recreation is expected to flourish. Investors see a business there that works hand-in-hand

DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL

Property targeted for development.



ERDC

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with what the river offers, possibly a canoe livery.

Investors also are in talks with food businesses about filling a former restaurant space in that same area, Wichman said.

"Who goes in the buildings is as important as which buildings we buy," said Wyckoff, who has been working on marketing the ERDC's properties. "We want anything that the community can use that will serve customers but at the same time is a destination."

Davidson said those involved with the ERDC believe Eaton Rapids contains all the "raw materials" it needs to be a destination city. He cites its access to the river, its G.A.R. Island Park and its historical downtown, which contains several buildings that date back to the 1800s.

Add to that the city's proximity to Battle Creek, Jackson and Lansing, and Davidson said Eaton Rapids is the ideal spot for area visitors to discover.

"We want to see business thriving in Eaton Rapids," he said. "One of our goals is to develop the riverfront. We feel that it's underutilized."

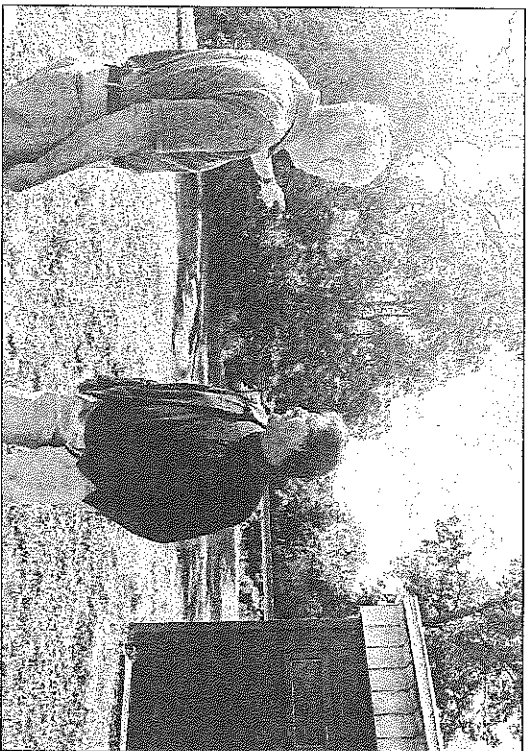
Next steps

Jaime Lawson and his wife, Traci, own Your Creative Escape, a paint-your-own-pottery shop they moved three months ago from Main Street to a building ERDC owns at 142 Hall St. The couple more than doubled the business space to roughly 4,000 square feet.

Jaime Lawson said he can see efforts to improve the waterfront and developers should capitalize on an upbeat momentum he said he notices around town.

"This town needs to utilize its river. That's the draw," he said. "Their dream looks good and sounds good. Let's hope they can do it."

Wyckoff said the ERDC is interested in buying additional properties and opening the corporation up to additional investors. That involves applying to become a "Regulation D" company under U.S. Securities and



Former Eaton Rapids Mayor Jamie Davidson (left) and Eaton Rapids Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Don Wyckoff stand on one of the riverfront properties owned by the Eaton Rapids Development Corporation. Both men are investors in the ERDC. RACHEL GRECO

Exchange Commission regulations, a process Wichman said is under way.

Access to markets

The designation is designed to make access to capital markets possible for small companies. Regulation D companies

properties the ERDC already owns — and find tenants for them.

By spring 2013, Wichman said, the group aims to have two or three of the Grand River properties occupied.

"We've had many conversations with potential renters," he said. "Most of those are subject to our ability to improve the properties."

Networking

In the meantime, Wyckoff said he continues to network with potential businesses who express interest in Eaton Rapids.

Looking ahead, ERDC officials say they can't pin down exactly when their vision for both riverfronts will be realized — only that they are working to make it happen.

"How far away are we?" said Wyckoff. "That's kind of hard to determine. These businesses need to be ready to move here. What we offer has to be worth their while."

Lansing State Journal reporter Lindsay VanHulle contributed to this report.