

REAL ESTATE

Fitchburg Project Recycles Materials And Tenants

For-profit values drive eco-conscious renovations

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At first glance, Robert Ansin, CEO of Lawrence-based MassInnovation, might look suspiciously like a do-gooder.

He's passionate about alternative energy, particularly geo-thermal heating and cooling systems. And he talks a lot about creating the kind of city centers where neighbors run into each other at the local coffee shop. But Ansin insists that, at his heart, he is a businessman.

Driven To Save

Take the Toyota Prius he drives. The hybrid car may play to the stereotype of an earnest environmentalist, but Ansin says a big part of what he likes about it is that it paid for itself in just a few years through the gas money he saved by ditching his old SUV.

"I get a great return on that investment," he said. "It put money in my pocket."

According to Ansin, the same logic applies to the transformation of the Anwelt Shoe Co. factory in Fitchburg, which his family once operated, into a geothermal- and solar-powered mixed-use complex.

When he began working on the mill in 1997, there were a few small companies scattered around the sprawling buildings, but much of

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the space sat empty. Ansin realized there was probably no way to revive the factory as a major manufacturing site. Instead, he convinced his father to invest \$2 million in remaking the building entirely so that it would be an attractive location for a variety of modern uses.

"Someday, if my kids own the building, I



PHOTO/LIVIA GERSHON

Robert Ansin, CEO of MassInnovation, stands in front of the solar array on the rooftop at of the former Anwelt Shoe Factory in Fitchburg.

don't want them to have to figure out the fundamentals," he said.

Salvage Business

When the developer set out to rehabilitate the first building, a contractor told him he'd have to spend big money to haul out most of the interior. So Ansin fired the contractor, learned to drive an excavator and ended up keeping 90 percent of the materials to use for rebuilding. As it turned out, the salvaged materials were worth more than the cost of demolition, putting the whole process in the black.

The use of a geothermal heating and cooling system made similar economic sense. Below six feet underground, water stays around 55 degrees all year. By digging wells and pumping the water through the old factory buildings, MassInnovation can save big money over the life of the building.

Ansin also installed a 147-kilowatt solar system in the old buildings, thanks to a \$500,000 grant from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative and a matching federal grant.

Today, the Fitchburg MassInnovation center is home to the North Central Charter Essential

School and several smaller businesses and non-profits. The buildings maintain much of the look of the old mill, and materials from its industrial past are visible everywhere. Huge wooden beams hold up solar panels in the complex courtyard.

Next month, the latest part of the project will come to life, with the first tenants moving in at The Anwelt Heritage Apartments, 86 mixed-income apartments for seniors. Ansin said some of those who are slated to move in once worked for the old shoe company.

The next step for MassInnovation is redeveloping a huge Lawrence mill into "ecoluxury" condominiums. The project hit a snag when it lost some financing in the recent credit crunch, but Ansin said he expects it to be fully financed and back in motion this summer.

Ansin calls MassInnovation a "triple bottom line" company. It's out to make a profit, but it's also in business to help the environment and support revitalization efforts in the cities where it does business.

Sustainable building is also a selling point for many, Ansin notes, especially aging baby boomers who may be looking to align their living situation with their ideals. ■