

Sentinel & Enterprise



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ABOVE: Robert Ansin stands near a portion of the MassInnovation Center's geothermal heating and cooling system, recently in Fitchburg. **BELOW:** Ansin discusses the solar power system in the building.

A model of efficiency

Ansin's MassInnovation building about more than just renewable energy

By Brandon Butler

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FITCHBURG — Earlier this month when city officials wanted to learn more about an energy-efficient geothermal heating and cooling system they turned to Robert Ansin.

Ansin, a Fitchburg-native and CEO of MassInnovation, is redeveloping Cleghorn's Anwelt mill into an affordable-housing complex for citizens 55 and older, and has plans to attract commercial businesses to another part of the complex.

North Central Charter Essential School is also located on the premise and the buildings use a combination of solar power and geexchange — a process that uses the Earth's steady underground temperature to heat or cool a building.

"Just like it doesn't take energy to cool a hot coffee if you let it sit out," Ansin explained.

The process works by digging wells — in Ansin's case a well the height of the Hancock Tower, or 1,500 feet — and

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'The mayor needs to be that number one sales person.'

Robert Ansin, on selling Fitchburg to potential businesses

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circulating water between the building and the underground well. The ground temperature is a constant 55 degrees and electric pumps either extract heat or add heat to warm or cool the building.

"It's more efficient, you need less energy to heat or cool a building," he said. "You're moving heat from one place to another, so you're using the earth as a furnace."

Sally Cragin, a School Committee member and chair of the schools' Building Needs Committee, said officials are still pursuing the idea of installing a similar geothermal system at Crocker Elementary School.

The school's boiler broke last year and the Massachusetts School Building Authority gave initial approval to repair the school's heating and cooling system.

"We did a tour of the MassInnovation center and the school and Bob (Ansin) has been very helpful and forthcoming about sharing his experiences," Cragin said.

Cragin said Superintendent Andre Ravenelle has contacted a geothermal installation company to do a site visit of Crocker.

"This is a decision that we as a city and the city government get to make together," Cragin said.

One criticism of the system, however, is its higher initial cost. But Ansin said the system saves money over time.

"We need to take all the factors into account," Cragin said. "... Taking the long view is more economical."

Cragin said it is too early to tell if a geothermal system would actually be installed at Crocker.

"If it is the best system for us, I would absolutely hope (one is used at Crocker)," she said. "I'm very excited by geothermal energy being used and I'd love to see it be used even more."

But there's more than just energy-efficiency at stake

when Ansin uses geoexchange systems, he said.

"If you want to attract customers, you have to have a more competitive project," he said. "Our buildings save customers money on energy costs, that's an attractive offer."

Revitalizing Fitchburg

Energy efficiency is a way Ansin attracts customers, he said, but more needs to be done for the city to encourage a larger-scale economic revitalization.

He said an important step is a strong connection between public and private parties. That can happen, he said, by implementing a development review process led by the mayor.

The process involves all city departments — police, fire, public works — so that there are "no surprises down the road for an investor."

"Investment is about gauging risk," he said.

The review process would walk a developer through the process of investing in the city, all the while having open communication with city departments.

"The mayor needs to be that number one sales person," he said.

He said a second thing Fitchburg can do is to encourage public-private partnerships. He said cities can work with developers to construct public buildings such as schools and police stations.

"When a developer does it, it's sustainable, faster, less expensive and better quality," he said.

He said the key to all these is strong leadership, which he said starts with the mayor.

Ansin said he was particularly impressed earlier this month when Fitchburg Mayor Lisa Wong invited him to a discussion about upcoming legislation on wetlands that could restrict development in the city.

"That shows that this mayor cares about business," he said.

He said when he is

researching a city to decide if he will invest millions to redevelop a mill site, he often looks to the local government.

"Fitchburg has taken a major step by electing a leader, because none of this is possible if you don't have a leader in the city who has a strong vision," he said.

As for the future, Ansin said it is more likely he would invest again in Fitchburg before going to another community.

"I'm looking for more investments," he said. "Now is a wonderful time to buy."

Ansin said he is looking at some sites in Fitchburg but said no purchases are imminent.

And the market overall?

Ansin said he thinks there will be a high demand for condominiums and apartments soon — and some of those could be in downtown Fitchburg

Not only is there enough demand, but development spurs other development.

"A rising tide lifts all ships," he said.

Major priorities

Dan Curley, executive director of Fitchburg Industrial Development Commission, said it is a priority of the city's to redevelop old mill sites, like the MassInnovation center.

"The development work needs to be done by private individuals," Curley said. "But it's the city's responsibility to create that type of environment and climate that is business-friendly, where businesses want to come here."

He said part of that is to make it easier for businesses to come to the city. He said some initiatives are already in place, such as special mill zoning that allows for more flexible use of space for commercial, residential or industrial projects.

"To create that environment, so much is part of that, from general quality of life to our initiatives," Curley said. "There are people out there that are interested, the

mill sites get a lot of attention."

Curley said each mill site has to be evaluated on its own based on the history and condition of the building. He said some mill buildings are so decrepit that they need to be torn down and he said other mill buildings are structurally sound but need some rehabilitation.

"It's about people stepping up to the plate, and Mr. Ansin is a great example of that, someone who is taking a site and having a very innovative use," Curley said. "It takes individuals with forward thinking to take a look at something and say, 'This is what it could be.'"

As for the MassInnovation project, Ansin said he hopes to begin accepting applications for residents of "Anwelt Heritage" in two weeks and said residents will begin moving in around April.

"They are gorgeous units," he said.

He said he hopes to have some of the 55 and older residents be some former employees of the Anwelt Shoe factory that used to be housed at the site.

The complex will have 86 units with a majority being affordable. The energy-efficient heating and cooling systems could also cut energy costs in half for residents.

The next step after the housing complex is complete would be to develop the adjacent building, likely for commercial or public use.

"I'd love to do another school," he said.

Already he said the combination of a 350-student public high school next to the elderly housing complex will create a "synergy" at the site.

Ansin said part of the reason he likes developing mills so much is because of their mixed-use capabilities.

"There are so many uses that one building can have, from residential, to commercial to public use, almost anything is possible with these spaces," he said.

Those interested in units at Anwelt Heritage can call (978) 683-2901.