

THREE RIVERS PROJECT LOOKS TO REVAMP HISTORIC WATERFRONT SITE

By Sarah Hall

For nearly 20 years, the Town of Clay has been working on fixing up the Three Rivers site where the Seneca, Oneida and Oswego rivers meet.

"It's been a long process," said Town Board member Naomi Bray, who has made it her mission to see the project to fruition. "It gets frustrating. But it's definitely an ongoing process. We've not come to a point where there are definite decisions. There are wishes, as there have been since the early 1990s."

Three Rivers has quite a lot of historical significance in Central New York. Archeological excavations have uncovered evidence of Native American settlements that date back hundreds of years before the first Clay settler took up residence at Three Rivers in 1793. It is thought to be the site of gatherings of the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, and military leaders from the French and Indian War as well as the American Revolution are known to have visited the point.

The current project looks to embrace that history, as well as build on the Town's 27 miles of waterfront.

"We really haven't made good use of that prime territory," Bray said. "It just seemed like a wonderful natural asset that we should be urging more activity to develop there, and happily it is."

It's not just the Town that's eager to capitalize on the many waterfront opportunities; the residents want it, as well.

"We have heard from residents in the town who have boats and who use the waterways that they wish there were more. They're hankering for a marina," Bray said. "One of my favorite stories about Lock 23 is that there are so few commercial and retail availabilities to boaters that the lockkeeper will give his car to people to go shopping. He sends them to Wegmans and other places. I said to him when he was telling me this, 'That's your car. Aren't you worried about that?' And looked at me and he said, 'I've got their boat.'"

The Town began acquiring the land in 1993 or 1994 when Cibro Petroleum Products went bankrupt.

"The Town inherited, so to speak, their land for \$2, 60-some acres. That was the catalyst," Bray said. "It was, 'Okay, now we can begin to get our feet into this vision that we have for the waterfront areas.' From the Cibro acquisition, we began to look at the point, which was the cherry on the whole project, because it is so beautiful there."

The Town then began the process of acquiring the surrounding land, which now totals roughly 85 acres from the point east to Bennett Road, on which were two former asphalt plants and the crumbling but historic Three Rivers Motel. The motel, which Bray called "a real eyesore," came down in 2004, but the former

asphalt plants' land was a brownfield and needed to be mitigated before any development could begin. So the Town contracted with Plumley Engineering in nearby Lysander to take on that aspect of the project.

"A brownfield is a property that's got some kind of environmental issues which hinder its redevelopment," said Dale Vollmer of Plumley Engineering. "This site has two former asphalt plants that are there. One has been demolished and it's just an open field now, but it's got soil and groundwater contamination. The Town owns that one. The other one is owned by Sunoco. They don't use it. It's been closed for many years. We're working with them and the Department of Environmental Conservation to bring that along to a new use where it's probably demolished and some investigation is done to see what issues there are."

Fortunately, in the early 2000s, the Town of Clay was the recipient of a relatively new Department of State grant called a Brownfield Opportunity Area grant which would allow the Town and Plumley Engineering to identify the issues that could be hindering development and come up with a way to address those issues in an economically viable manner.

"We come up with a plan then hopefully come up with the funding for the next round, which is the real development part, and get the rest of the property ready for redevelopment," Vollmer said. "We would probably dig up the contaminated soil and take it to a landfill. For some of the asphalt contamination, we are looking at possibly recycling some of that to make our walkways along the riverfront."

"It's really a multiphase project," said Plumley Engineering owner Joel Plumley. "We're really interested in making something happen at the point as soon as we can and working on the rest of it as soon as we can. We've committed to have our work done by the end of the year."

So what's the holdup? Largely, state environmental regulations and red tape have slowed the process.

"The Town of Clay started really working on getting the project off the ground in 1995 or so," Bray said. "I hate to say it, but we're looking at 20 years. It won't be another 20."

"We're looking to keep it in that 20, but the government works on its own schedule," Plumley said.

No matter the timeline, the project has always been seen as one that has promise.

"Karen Kitney, just before she retired as planning commissioner for the county, and Destiny was still on the books, and even given Destiny, Karen said this was the most exciting potential project we had in the county," Bray said.

Once it's completed — whenever that may be — the final project will certainly have a riverfront promenade, with some retail and boat docking. The rest of the features at Three Rivers Point are still up in the air.

"We'd like a park-like setting with some type of restaurant or entertainment, but that's still up in the air," Vollmer said. "We have a steering committee made up of Town and other community officials and interested citizens that's kind of guiding that process. We're getting to the point where we're starting to firm up what we want to do on the point, then we'll go to the public and have a series of public workshops where people can come in and talk and ask questions and so forth."

Plumley also pointed out the possibility for commercial or light industrial development elsewhere at the Three Rivers site, as well as residential development.

"That's the vision," he said.

Ultimately, Plumley said he thinks Three Rivers Point could look quite a bit like Red Mill Island in Baldwinsville, another project on which Plumley Engineering worked.

"It happened in Baldwinsville, the theory being, if you build it, they will come. And it did happen," he said. "They rebuilt Lock 24, Red Mill Inn was rehabilitated, it just went on and on. And we're thinking a very similar thing might happen here. It will draw people to at least start thinking about the waterfront."

Bray said what happened in Baldwinsville has great potential to happen in Clay.

"I hate the phrase destination point, but it would be a lovely destination point for the residents of the Town of Clay to make use of the waterfront, but also whatever kind of auxiliary projects eventually come there," she said.

The project already has great support in the community. "There's been a nice, quiet support throughout the Town. You just don't hear negatives," Bray said. "There are so many reasons why the community at large feels comforted by it. We haven't spent millions of dollars acquiring and developing this point, nor do we plan to."

Though there isn't necessarily an end date in sight for the entire project, all are confident that the Three Rivers Point project is doable and will ultimately bring in private dollars to complete development on the rest of the 85-acre site. "We can do a lot on the point," Vollmer said. "I think that's the key. That will be the magnet for the rest of it."



Three Rivers Motel historic photo courtesy of Naomi Bray personal collection