

OUR region

Epic redevelopment saga continues in downtown Adams

Mausert Block's two upper floors nearing completion, as 'Food + Wellness Hub' takes shape at street level

BY BRAD JOHNSON

Nearly seven years ago, the November 2013 issue of *BERKSHIRE TRADE & COMMERCE* featured a story on the redevelopment of the Mausert Block in downtown Adams, which was being undertaken by North Adams residents Stephen and Holly Stenson of Braytonville Properties LLC.

That story turned out to be somewhat premature. However, its main headline – “Perseverance on Park Street” – proved to be prescient.

At that time, having overcome an initial series of setbacks, the Stensons appeared to have a clear path to completion of the mixed commercial and residential redevelopment project in the months ahead. That path instead detoured into a new tangle of regulatory roadblocks and other delays that left the prominent downtown building in a prolonged state of suspended animation – not dead but not moving forward.

“There were various reasons for the delays,” said Stephen Stenson in a recent interview, noting that these contributed to a full stop of work on the project from June 2015 to April 2017.

Since then, the project has moved in fits and starts, with the anticipated completion date for the residential units being pushed back several times, and plans for the commercial component undergoing a series of revisions of varying magnitude.

In the early months of 2020, almost three years after resuming work on the redevelopment project, there was an end in sight for



Standing on Park Street in bright July sunshine, Stephen Stenson can also see the light at the end of the tunnel for his multi-year redevelopment of the Mausert Block in downtown Adams. He and his wife Holly, through their company Braytonville Properties, purchased the once-prominent building for \$60,000 in 2011.

the Stensons. They were on track to begin showing the first five of the building's 10 new market-rate apartments to prospective tenants by late March, with the remaining apartments and other components of the mixed-use complex following in late spring and summer.

“And then comes the plague,” said Stenson.

“And then comes the plague,” said Stenson, referring to the coronavirus pandemic that has disrupted lives and economies around the world.

For the Stensons and the Mausert Block, disruption came in the several forms – from complications with

some subcontractors on the project who were suddenly unable to complete required services, to a lack of clarity on how to go about showing the finished apartments to prospective tenants under social distancing protocols and other restrictions.

The health crisis also made it more difficult to sustain newfound momentum for



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Currently set up with the front of the building (6,960 s.f.) serving as executive offices – including two conference rooms, eight offices, a large library and ancillary spaces. The rear of the building (8,400 s.f.) currently houses nine analytical testing laboratories, chemical storage space and a single loading dock. Three natural gas, ground-mounted AC and heating units service the entire building. The property is located within an industrial park in Adams, MA, and is in an Opportunity Zone, adjacent to the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail and the Hoosic River.



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their evolving plans for the street-level commercial space.

“It’s the uncertainty around all of this,” said Stenson. “You can’t plan. You’re just trying to react if you can.”

While the pandemic has become the latest test of the Stensons’ perseverance on the project, they continue to take things in stride.

“We always knew taking on this building would be a challenge,” said Stenson. “But we knew that if and when we completed it, it would be a flagship project in Adams. That’s what keeps us going.”

Transformative process

Transforming the Mausert Block from a vacant shell into a vibrant commercial and residential complex that would contribute to ongoing downtown revitalization efforts has been the Stensons’ long-standing goal since purchasing the building for the bargain price of \$60,000 nine years ago.

The 28,000-square-foot building (including basement space) was constructed in the 1890s in the Romanesque architectural style. For most of its history the building played a prominent role in the commercial and social activity of downtown Adams, as home to the town’s F.W. Woolworth store, the Adams Masonic Hall, and other businesses and activities.

In more recent times, the Mausert Block had seen its fortunes shift with those of downtown itself: the loss of longtime anchor businesses, replaced by a revolving mix of short-lived retail and commercial tenants on street level; and a diminished demand for the professional offices and apartments that once filled the upper floors.

Following their purchase of the then-vacant building in March 2011, the Stensons began planning a redevelopment project that would include street-level commercial space complemented by market-rate rental apartments on the upper floors. Both aspects would capitalize on the building’s central location and its proximity to the



The building has 10 market-rate apartments, including this one on the third floor overlooking Park Street.

Ashuwillticook Rail Trail, the popular recreational attraction stretching from Adams to Lanesboro that runs directly behind the Mausert Block.

As their concept for the street-level space evolved over the years, the Stensons officially welcomed the building’s first commercial tenant, albeit one that’s close to home.

In October 2018, they held a ribbon-cutting event for the opening of the “international headquarters” of REDPM (Real Estate Development and Property Management), a separate company operated by the Stensons that is serving as general contractor on the Mausert Block

project. (The “international” designation is, in part, a tongue-in-cheek nod to Stephen Stenson’s Scottish origins.)

Stenson noted that the long, narrow space on the left side of the building had always been intended for REDPM, given that its configuration was not well suited to retail shops or other business tenants. “It meets our needs very nicely, but

might have been a hard fit for others,” he said. REDPM had its origins in Cambridge, where the Stensons lived and worked prior to their gradual transition to the Berkshires several years ago. That process began when they started building a portfolio of invest-

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ment real estate in north county through Braytonville Properties.

Their purchase of the Mausert Block in 2011 represented the largest addition to Braytonville’s holdings and was the first to include a commercial-use component.

Holly Stenson has served as construction and project manager for REDPM activities in the Boston area and for renovation work on multifamily residential properties acquired by Braytonville in North Adams and Adams.

Stephen Stenson, originally from Glasgow, is an architect by profession – a skill set that he has applied to various renovation projects, including the Mausert Block and other properties held by Braytonville.

The advent of the Mausert Block project, and a desire to raise their children in a less urban environment, led the Stensons to move to North Adams on a full-time basis in 2013.

Food + Wellness Hub

The Stensons’ own commitment to the project over the years has been facilitated by the ongoing support of MassDevelopment, their primary source of financing.

Stenson said this support from the state’s quasi-public development finance agency encompassed not only the original \$700,000 direct loan for the project in 2013 but also an additional \$305,000 in funding as its budget grew in subsequent years from an initial estimate of \$1 million.

“MassDevelopment has been an excellent partner,” said Stenson. “They’ve been very patient and have stayed with us step by step along the way.”

In addition to the \$1.05 million in financing from MassDevelopment, the project also received an earlier grant of \$120,000 from the town for facade work to replicate and restore some of the original architectural detail of the building. Those funds, provided through the Adams Downtown Facade and Signage Improvement Program, kick-started the first visible progress on the project in early 2012.

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The remainder of the roughly \$1.7 million spent to date on the project has come from the Stensons through Braytonville Properties.

What these investments have yielded are the completion of the 10 market-rate rental apartments on the building's two upper floors and preliminary work on the main level, which is now envisioned as becoming what the Stensons call a "Food + Wellness Hub."

"We've always had the idea of having a wellness center and a restaurant there," said Stenson.

He noted that earlier on the wellness center was envisioned as a shared space where a variety of practitioners and entrepreneurs would collaboratively offer a range of wellness services, while the restaurant space was intended to take advantage of the building's proximity to the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail.

Over the past year or so, the Stensons have been revising and refining their plans for the main floor, guided and influenced by their discussions with a wide range of individuals, businesses and organizations.

Among these are Berkshire Agricultural Ventures, Berkshire Grown, Northern Berkshire Community Coalition, and Dr. Mark Pettus at Berkshire Health Systems. They and others will be involved in varying degrees in implementing a multifaceted and multi-phase concept for the Food + Wellness Hub.

"It's a much wider concept," said Stenson. "There's a synergy taking shape."

As described on the project's website (www.mausert.com) the Food + Wellness Hub is envisioned as "a central location that provides food storage, small-scale processing, retail, distribution, as well as events, meetings and a location for training and program delivery."

Its mission would be "to address public food and wellness issues in a collaborative partnership" with "a variety of Berkshire county organizations and commercial end users" with the aim of developing, promoting and providing easier access to broad categories such as agricultural support, local food and wellness services, among others.

While interest has been building in the Stensons' concept for the Food + Wellness Hub, the overall process of moving forward



Stephen and Holly Stenson join their sons James, 12, and Gavin, 8, on the lawn in front of Town Hall across from the Mausert Block. After building a portfolio of rental properties in the region, the Stensons relocated from Cambridge to North Adams in 2013 with a desire to raise their family in a less urban environment. Their work on the Mausert Block, which they purchased in 2011, predates the arrival of young Gavin.

has been slowed by the coronavirus emergency and statewide shutdown order.

However, Stenson sees the current situation as bolstering the project and its long-term goals. "After things open back up, everyone I've talked to believes there will be a greater need for this space," he said.

Residential revisions

Meanwhile, the pandemic is also complicating the debut of the residential apartments. Stenson noted that during April and May the remaining work on the apartments was able to continue while adhering to new

construction-site safety measures. "The fortunate thing for us is we're doing finishing [work] now, which makes it easier to keep safe distances," he said.

He noted that, since the project's origins, the plans for the apartments have also evolved. This included using the prolonged work stoppage from 2015 to 2017 to make some important adjustments and improvements to their plans for the rental units.

Stenson explained that changes in the local housing market that had taken shape during this period, along with advances in certain technologies, led them to enhance some design elements of the apartments and make the overall project much more energy efficient.

"It totally changed our strategy on the building," he said, noting that there was a more pronounced demand for "higher-end market rate" apartments than there had been just a few years ago.

To better meet that demand, they opted for some higher quality finishes and other improvements for the apartments once work on the upper floors resumed in 2017.

The delays also allowed them to incorporate more advanced – and increasingly affordable – green technologies for the indi-

vidual apartments and overall building. This ranges from such basic steps as using all LED lighting to installing more advanced heating and cooling systems, as well as wiring the apartments for compatibility with whatever "smart home" systems tenants may choose to utilize. It also includes the forward-looking step of equipping each apartment's dedicated parking space with an electric-vehicle charging station.

"We've made it a much more green building," said Stenson.

With these and other changes, Stenson said the anticipated rent for the apartments will be in the \$1,200-and-up range, not including utilities.

As with so many other things, however, the pandemic has raised questions about market demand for the apartments now ready to be leased.

As Gov. Charlie Baker's multi-phase plan for reopening the state continues to move forward following its May 18 announcement, there continues to be uncertainty about how much and how soon various aspects of lives will return to normal. That includes issues of if, when and how to go about changing a place of residence.

Stenson said that his expectations about how soon the building's apartments may be leased have been lowered, based on the uncertainty that will continue to swirl in the months ahead. "We'll be leasing a lot slower than we projected," he said.

Lingering health concerns will also influence how prospective tenants go about viewing the apartments. Additional precautions will have to be taken to ensure the safety of all involved during actual showings, he said.

He also plans to offer an old-school version of a virtual tour with large placards showcasing various features of the apartments. These will be displayed in the street-level windows and may also be positioned in an open street-level space that interested parties can walk through before scheduling an actual tour of the apartments.

"Like everything else, it's something we're all adjusting to and learning how to do under COVID guidelines," he said.

With these and other pieces of the project now falling into place, Stenson said that, despite the delays, the redeveloped Mausert Block represents something of a milestone for the town of Adams. "This will be the first successful redevelopment of a commercial building in Adams in over 30 years," he said, referring to the Berkshire Mill commercial and residential project at the northern end of downtown that was completed in 1986.

Noting that a variety of other projects involving prominent downtown buildings have failed to move forward over the past few decades, he said getting the Mausert Block across the finish line will be reason to celebrate. "We think it's a pretty big deal," he said. ♦

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