The first round (2003–2004) of CHAPA’s Smart Growth Demonstration Initiative, including this case study series, was funded by MassHousing and Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP). MassHousing is a quasi-public state agency that has provided more than $8.5 billion in financing for more than 80,000 units of mixed-income rental housing and over 43,000 mortgage loans for first-time homebuyers. MHP is a self-supporting state agency that promotes more stable and diverse neighborhoods in cities and towns across Massachusetts through the development and preservation of affordable housing. Citizen’s Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA) is the statewide, nonprofit umbrella organization for affordable housing and community development activities in Massachusetts.

Redevelopment Context

Transforming former industrial sites into affordable residential properties can prove quite complex, as the F.B. Roger’s Mill project in Taunton illustrates. A grassroots, local initiative can make the difference in elevating the profile of these projects, by getting the word out to the private sector and making these projects a priority at the local and state levels of government.

The F.B. Roger’s Mill was once a major employer in the silverplating industry that made Taunton famous. The two- to four-story mill complex lining the Taunton River is a tremendous natural and recreational resource that is gradually becoming more accessible, both visually and physically, with new public parks across from and just upstream of the mill. Within a five-minute walk is Weir Village, a small center with a fire station, professional offices, restaurants, and small stores. Surrounding neighborhoods are predominantly single-family housing with some nearby condominium properties.

The proposed plan for the district recommends adaptive reuse of the architecturally significant sections of the F.B. Roger’s Mill and removes part of the existing structure to improve waterfront views and access.
Although changes are occurring, the immediate context for the F.B. Roger’s Mill remains an older industrial area with small manufacturing businesses, steel storage yards, vacant land, warehouses, and utility facilities. The site does not have good highway access and the truck traffic generated by business uses local roads to reach regional arterials and limited access highways.

The F.B. Roger’s Mill has been abandoned for many years. The City of Taunton acquired the property and secured it, but due to fire hazard and safety liability issues, the city was anxious to dispose of the mill to a private developer. The Weir Corporation of Taunton, a local, nonprofit, community development corporation (CDC), could see the potential of the mill for affordable housing. However, because the Weir Corporation is a relatively new CDC, it needed to attract a private development partner with experience and equity that would share their vision for change along the riverfront.

**Smart Growth Demonstration Initiative Assistance**

In early 2003, the Weir Corporation submitted an application to CHAPA’s Smart Growth Demonstration Initiative. Using the grant awarded by CHAPA in July 2003, the Weir Corporation engaged Sasaki Associates to help the community visualize a redevelopment plan for the district. GLC Development Resources LLC was engaged to prepare pre-development and financial feasibility studies for the project.

In addition, the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP) provided consultants Charleen and John Regan to help the city draft a Request for Proposals (RFP) that would generate a development program responsive to the community’s interests, and the Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation (CEDAC) provided technical assistance to the Weir Corporation to help them assess their role and the pre-development costs in the project.

Through the Smart Growth Demonstration Initiative, several different scenarios for development were identified and evaluated according to their financial feasibility and the established community goals. The visioning study allowed the community, the city, and the funders to see the potential for the F.B. Roger’s site as a transformative project that could catalyze other redevelopment in the area. The site analysis, alternatives, and district master plan helped inform the RFP and its evaluation criteria.

**Smart Growth Principles and Project Context**

Numerous smart growth principles apply to this project, including adaptive reuse of an historic mill and brown field site, redevelopment of an industrial site into mixed use, creation of usable open space and access to the Taunton River, and development of affordable rental and/or homeowner opportunities.

The mill structures on the F.B. Roger’s property occupy practically the entire site with no room for surface parking, open space, or riverfront walkways. The mill complex was built at different time periods, with several distinct but joined structures. At the south end is a four-story structure, clad in brick with beautiful high windows. At the north end, closest to Weir Village, is a three-story brick headhouse, which includes the paneled offices of the former mill. Between these are two separate, four-story buildings, with small irregular windows and wood- and asphalt-shingle siding. Residential neighborhoods are only one block away, connected by a series of street corridors, but views to the river are completely cut off by the F.B. Roger’s buildings.

The Roger’s Mill property represents the pivotal point at which a community needs to come to terms with a new future that is built around neighborhoods, housing, riverfront recreation, and supporting retail, rather than the vestiges of an industrial past. The city has a number of more modern industrial parks that are closer to the highway and have newer infrastructure.
Development Principles and Alternatives

Sasaki Associates undertook a visioning process which involved conversations with multiple stakeholders including the Weir Corporation, the city’s economic development and planning departments, adjacent property owners, and the electric and gas utility companies that own and operate facilities in the area south of the F.B. Roger’s Mill. These conversations identified key issues and concerns, as well as possibilities for change in the area.

While several industrial owners were interested in maintaining the status quo, other property owners were interested in strategies that would improve land values. The community-based Weir Corporation was clear that their primary goal was affordable housing, homeownership, and riverfront access. They were interested in retaining the historic character of the mill and its surroundings and creating a more pedestrian-friendly, stable neighborhood.

Interwoven like a complex puzzle were the following issues that affected every aspect of the development approach, program, and costs:

- Height of the 100-year flood
- Condition of existing foundation and structure
- Presence of hazardous materials
- Historic value and adaptability of different segments of the mill complex
- Cost of demolition
- On- and off-site parking strategies
- Views to and from the river
- Existing and future uses of adjacent industrial properties

A number of scenarios were developed to address these issues and to evaluate trade-offs. The scenarios tested different development programs for the F.B. Roger’s property and reflected the implications of each one on the surrounding district. The available financing program dictated certain development approaches, not all of which were necessarily compatible with community goals. The development program variables included:

- Number of units
- Tenure (rental versus ownership)
- Mix of incomes
- Targeted demographic (elderly versus non-elderly)
- Balance of adaptive reuse, demolition, and new construction
- Parking requirements and solutions
- Catalytic affect on surrounding district

Challenges and Lessons

The Smart Growth Demonstration Initiative helped the community clarify its goals and highlighted the trade-offs necessary to achieve those goals. Through the visioning process, the city and the community could see the positive affect that the F.B. Roger’s redevelopment strategy could have on the regeneration of the entire district. The technical and aesthetic evaluation criteria generated by the study became the basis for the selection of the developer in the RFP process. The selected development team, which includes the Weir Corporation, is fine tuning the project parameters to determine if the project can be feasible while holding true to community goals.
Although low-income and historic tax credits would have helped the project’s bottom line, these financing tools would preclude the community’s preferred plan, which retains the brick buildings at the north and south end of the property and demolishes the tattered wood structures in between. The district inland from the mill would suddenly have spectacular views and public access to the riverfront, improving the chances for regeneration of the entire area as a mixed-use neighborhood.

The adaptive reuse of the more handsome buildings will allow for 60 homeownership units with parking on the ground floor. A limited amount of retail or boat rental space may be appropriate in the building nearest Weir Village. With the recommended demolition strategy, space will be available on-site for landscaped surface parking, as well as small park areas overlooking the river.

Approximately 140 new residential units are possible across Water Street on a parcel that is now partially warehouse and partially vacant. Over time, three of the other historic mill complexes in the area could be renovated for live/work units, residential, industrial technology, or office uses. New office or industrial space may be suitable on the prominent Fifth Street, serving as a transition to the more extensive industrial properties south of the district. A new road link on the Sixth Street right-of-way could reroute trucks away from the front of the F.B. Roger’s site to a more direct connection to the regional highway network.

The commitment to community goals has made it difficult to find a private development partner who can structure a profitable deal. Unfortunately, the use of historic tax credits would have required that the entire mill complex be retained, a scenario that would continue to wall off the riverfront with buildings that were not attractive. With next to no land available, adequate parking ratios would have been difficult to achieve. This situation drove the program toward elderly housing, but the ongoing industrial character of the district made it hard to imagine this as a suitable demographic.

The proposed redevelopment plan suggests selective demolition to bring the community to the water’s edge.

The use of low-income tax credits requires that the units be rental properties, a scenario that the CDC prefers to avoid. As the project moves forward, it may become necessary to mix rental and homeownership in order to make the project more feasible. One strategy would locate rental properties in the southern building, which is closer to the ongoing industrial uses. The northern building, which is closer to Weir Village, would be more suitable for homeownership.

Another approach being considered is to find a larger nonprofit development corporation to partner with the local Weir Corporation. This solution may change the hurdle for financial feasibility, while still providing the organizational expertise and capacity necessary for a project of this size. Through the development of this and other mill renovations in the area, the Weir Corporation can develop its own internal capacity and equity to lead on future projects.

To find out more about affordable housing and smart growth, visit: www.chapa.org or contact Karen Wiener of CHAPA at 617-742-0820 or kwiener@chapa.org.

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