

Developer Brings Luck Of Irish To Southbridge

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Written by Matthew L. Brown

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Memorial Hall will get green feel

Colm Cryan, the globetrotting Irishman renovating the long-vacant Memorial Hall building on Main Street in Southbridge, wants the building to become a model for sustainable redevelopment and a home base for many more such projects throughout New England.

Cryan, whose background is as a telecommunications engineer, bought the building, which sits at 419 Main St. last year. At the same time, he established a new company, Sustainable Building Refurbishment (SBR), which will have offices in the building. Native Irishman Cryan lived in Central Massachusetts for 14 years, but now lives in Limerick, where he runs BRE Ireland.

BRE Ireland is a division of Building Research Establishment, a British charitable trust that does sustainability consulting and engineering work and puts all of its profits into academic research.

Overseas Expertise

Cryan said he would bring many of the techniques, lessons and methods he's used and learned with BRE to the United States through SBR.

"We are in a unique position to fuse local knowledge with extensive international research," Cryan said. He said the building would "serve as a demonstration of what best practice can achieve," adding that he wants SBR "to become a center of excellence for next generation refurbishment," across New England.

Cassandra Acly, Southbridge's economic development director, said the town is happy the building is being saved by someone with such lofty ambitions.

The Victorian-era building has been completely vacant for about a year, while its upper floors have been vacant "for years and years and years," Acly said.

"It's a very important building, and a valuable piece of real estate. It's painful to see it in distress," Acly said. "We've been very worried. We've heard people say, 'You need to take down that building.'"

Now, Acly said the town has already spoken with people interested in putting a restaurant in one of the building's retail spots.

Cryan said local developer and fellow Irishman J. Gabriel McCarthy, who has successfully refurbished a number of commercial and residential buildings in Southbridge, is managing the refurbishment of Memorial Hall.

So far, SBR has replaced the building's entire roof, and has repaired much of the structural damage brought on by the years of neglect, Cryan said.

Over the next year, Memorial Hall will be reborn, Cryan said, not simply as an historic reproduction, but as a high-tech showpiece for energy efficiency.

"This year, we're refurbishing it with local materials, natural materials and local labor," he said. "We're going to put it back the way it should be, with a balance between modern technology and the existing structure."

"We believe that the historic environment must allow for new architecture and modern lifestyles," he added. The project will employ "the latest thinking" in energy and water management, materials, ecology, public health and pollution and waste minimization. He said BRE has experimental facilities in England that produce all their own energy.

When complete, there will be seven residential units, two retail units and an office for SBR in Memorial Hall.

Cryan said sustainable development isn't just a fad. It's a necessity as energy prices soar, but it also fits in well with Southbridge itself. The town has incorporated certain sustainability measures into its master plan for downtown redevelopment and McCarthy refurbished his 12 Crane St. building as a highly efficient structure.

"It's the right agenda for the town," he said.

Cryan described Memorial Hall as another jewel in Southbridge's necklace of newly refurbished buildings.

Acly said without the building, Main Street would be like a mouth missing a tooth.

"It's an important front tooth, if you think about a smile," she said. "The town is 100 percent behind this project."

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