

Plans drawn up for \$9M riverfront project

Developer envisions a catalyst for renewal



The design calls for a restaurant overlooking the water. RB+B Architects

Molly Armbrister

A sagging yet historic pocket of Fort Collins that hugs the Cache la Poudre River might soon see a measure of renewal – if everything works out the way Encompass Technologies hopes.

The Fort Collins-based software company, which has outgrown its headquarters at 324 Jefferson St., has drawn up plans to build a \$9-million, four-story, terraced building on riverfront property.

As envisioned, the building would serve as a new home for Encompass and include 12 apartment units on the top two floors, a restaurant and an underground parking structure, all on the banks of the Cache la Poudre at 418 Linden St.

Encompass sees its project as a model for future similar developments in the Poudre River Redevelopment District, as the catalyst sought by the city for years.

The project is called Block One, a nod to the historical roots of the area. The parcel where it would be built is designated as "Block One" in the original plat of the City of Fort Collins.

The approximately one-acre site was formerly home to a concrete batch plant that has since been razed by the owner. Now, the father-and-son team that steers Encompass, Kent and Jonathan O'Neil, wants to help revitalize the area.

The O'Neils believe their project's close proximity to the river makes it particularly attractive to potential tenants. But that same proximity makes their plans controversial.

Indeed, environmental groups such as Save the Poudre don't like the project's location because of concerns about the potential impact on the river.

Gary Wockner, director of Save the Poudre, characterized an ecological impact study done on the project as "completely inadequate."

"The project appears to violate a couple sections of the land-use code and egregiously encroaches within a few feet of the bank of the Poudre River," Wockner said. "The environmental analysis is also substantially false because it states that the project will have no impact on the Poudre River."

Wockner said Save the Poudre is waiting for a more finalized version of the plan before deciding whether to take action to stop the project.

The project's real estate agent, Rich Shannon of Pinnacle Consulting Group, acknowledged that the development

raises a "key public policy question," and that where it's allowed to be built will make a huge difference.

"Will this site be an exciting gathering spot for the public to enjoy the river from a restaurant and other outdoor seating areas?" he asked in an email. "Or will it be a much more private development where a handful of businesses and residents enjoy a unique setting?"

"Communities across America proudly point to their 'restaurant on the river' locations. The O'Neil family and the design team thought it would be irresponsible to not provide the Fort Collins community that option," he said.

Shannon added that the team behind the project believes the designed site is the only location along the Poudre River from Shields Avenue to I-25 that can accommodate a restaurant with a view of the river.

The proposed location puts the project inside the city's river redevelopment district, which is exempt from a 300-foot river development buffer imposed in most of the rest of the city, according to Ted Shepard, the city planner assigned to the project.

The boundaries of the district are Jefferson Street, Willow Street, Lincoln Street and the Poudre River, Shepard said.

The [project plan](#) was presented to the Downtown Development Authority board Aug. 9, after the Business Report went to press.

The presentation, prepared by architect Randy Shortridge of RB+B Architects, includes some of the steps that would be taken to strike a balance between the environment and development.

"Tree clusters, open meadow areas and shrub thickets using predominantly native species will integrate the site with the river context," the presentation reads. "The river landscape buffer will be designed with a combination of understory shrubs and taller tree canopies with openings to provide a diverse landscape while creating visual access to the river from key use areas of the site."

The point of the presentation was to provide the board with a chance to review the design, a preliminary step toward gaining DDA support to use taxpayer dollars to improve facades on Linden Street, as well as public improvements to that section of Linden.

Todd Dangerfield, a DDA staff member, said he felt the developers were making a "conscious effort to transform the area."

The board will take up the issue again at its September meeting, Dangerfield said.

Shannon said about one-third of the proposed office space will be available to other tenants, as will retail space meant for a restaurant.

In total, the project will encompass 36,990 square feet and will include space for 73 vehicles.

Encompass has grown to 25 employees since it opened in 2001, and expects to grow to 40 by the time the

building is ready. The company's software was developed by the younger O'Neil to help his father and other beverage distributors with accounting and tracking issues.