

Cambridge Riverbank makeover ‘full throttle ahead’

BY KEVIN SWAYZE, RECORD STAFF

CAMBRIDGE — The old Riverbank restaurant is a construction site, but wedding couples are booking their parties in the stone landmark along the Grand River at Parkhill Road.

It’s an expression of confidence that leaves manager Leanne Ciancone heartened — and anxious.

“Three have booked. We haven’t even started advertising, which is the crazy part . . . there’s no backing down now: were going to have to be open in a year,” she said.

“We’re full throttle ahead.”

She’s part owner of the \$5 million project with her brothers Aaron and James. The Landmark Group also runs the Ancaster Old Mill and Spencer’s in Burlington on the Lake Ontario waterfront. They also own the historic old post office on Water Street in Cambridge.

Chain-link fences went up around the one-time grist mill last Thursday. Workers are expected to start Monday on the year-long job to remake the historic site into an upscale restaurant and reception centre.

It’s been a restaurant in several incarnations over the last four decades. It was two years ago that the last restaurant tenant pulled out abruptly, leaving wedding couples scrambling.

The Ciancones have owned the building for nearly two years, but haven’t done anything as they sorted out city zoning and land ownership issues. That took most of a year, including buying some remnant slivers of abutting land from the city and Grand River conservation authority.

Nothing inside the building will be left as it was before renovation, Ciancone said.

The first floor will be opened as the 80-seat Hespeler room. It’s storage space now with river-facing windows river bricked up after the 1974 flood.

The second floor — where the main entrance is — will seat 140 people and have easy access a new outdoor patio along the river, seating 90 more.

The main floor solarium will expand, as the glass walls are extended up to the third floor to give panoramic views to people there in the 180-seat Preston Ballroom.

The fourth-floor attic is also opening up for guest use. The Galt Room will seat about 30 people for “boardroom or intimate gatherings . . . double doors will look out over the river. It will be impressive,” Ciancone said.

While the family works on the Cambridge property, there are also ideas bubbling for the land next door beside the Waterscape condominium tower that’s expected to be done by year’s end.

The Ciancones and Paul de Haas, Waterscape’s developer, are talking about a joint project, perhaps some kind of hotel and conference centre. That’s all they say publicly, for now.

The city is reviewing an application help clean up the contaminated factory land, by delaying increases in property taxes. That money is instead put toward helping pay for remediation. Later, taxes would increase.

City council has been told in closed session about the application, but no firm plans for the site have been submitted, said city lawyer Steve Matheson. Council must approve any tax deal in open session.

And the Ciancones are trying to do something special with the old Post Office on Water Street South. The nationally designated heritage site has also seen use as restaurants and nightclubs over the years.

Plans have stalled to turn it into a restaurant and art gallery in partnership with the Cambridge Library, after a federal grant application was rejected. Brainstorming to find ways to partner with community organizations continue as the focus is on getting the Cambridge Mill open for business, Ciancone said.

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Leanne Ciancone manages the soon-to-be-renovated Riverbank Mill overlooking the Grand River in Cambridge.