

CHATHAM-When Columbia Box Board closed down here a decade ago, the county lost a major employer and another industrial landmark was left with broken windows and trees swaying on the rooftops.

With the elements taking their toll, and the paper business gone forever, the future of the sprawling mill was most certainly in doubt.

But Jody Rael of Old Chatham, president of nearby Kling Magnetics, saw something there and purchased the complex-junk and all-in 1997.

Now came the hard part: What does a magnet and magnetic paint maker with 25 employees do with a 100,000-square-foot paper mill, not to mention the 200 acres sitting out back beyond the train tracks?

The answer has something to do with the very elements eating away at his new property and Mr. Rael's passion for the arts.

His ambitious reuse project, Solaqua Power & Art, seeks to harness solar energy from photovoltaic panels and hydropower from the mill's Stony Kill dams to generate electricity used to produce hydrogen. The hydrogen then fuels glassblowing, foundry furnaces, kilns and metal forges, all of which will be open for public tours, classes, and apprenticeships for local students learning trades or renewable energy applications.

"A year and a half, two years ago, I started thinking, why not take the mill and turn it into an arts center?" said Mr. Rael, who works with his daughter, Rebecca Boyd, and has a son, Benjamin, at SUNY-Albany. "It's zoned industrial, so why not make it industrial arts? And I'm very interested in renewable energy." He envisions the power generated on site also being used for an inn, gallery, restaurant, pub and brewery, performance areas, office space, and a place for the Solaqua artisans to sell what they make. At the center of the complex is the stunning waterfall at the dam, a natural place to gather for food and drink or a concert.

Mr. Rael and Project Director Lauren Astor, who grew up with Mr. Rael in New York City, gave a tour of the complex to a reporter and photographer Wednesday.

"We'll be teaching the industrial arts for the 21st century," said Mr. Rael, who drove down Route 295 from Kling to the mill on his electric golf cart. "I'm dying to learn welding. Just imagine, you could come up here for a weekend, stay at the inn, and take an introductory course."

Before formally announcing the project, Solaqua worked with Art Omi in Ghent, sponsoring art installations, supplying solar-powered music for events (Mr. Rael plays six-string banjo and just formed a blues band), and launching plans to install a renewable energy system there.

They also plan energy exhibitions at the Children's Museum of Science and Technology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Tech Park in North Greenbush. And they're working with experts at the Bard Center for Environmental Policy.

At RPI, Solaqua found a consultant for the hydroelectric and hydrogen projects, and the university's solar power expert has visited the mill to begin planning for the installation of a solar concentrator.

Chatham's proximity to arts centers and the growing high-tech work going on at Capital Region schools and businesses, like those at the Tech Park, make this a perfect place for Solaqua, said Ms. Astor, a former teacher and business owner.

"We're right outside Albany and a whole arts corridor, from Storm King and Beacon right up to MASS MoCA [in North Adams, Mass.]," she said. "And we want to see how we can support the community, not just giving them a place to go, but creating more jobs so that economic growth spreads."

Though the project is far from reaching the Planning Board's table, Mr. Rael said officials here like what they've heard.

He recently showed the mill to town Supervisor Jesse DeGroot and members of the committee working on the town's new Comprehensive Plan, discussing the kind of growth commerce Chatham hopes to foster.

"We were all amazed about how we dovetailed together," said Mr. Rael, who has also consulted with Judy Grunberg, whose PS/21 performing arts center is planned for a field on Route 66. "They were talking about how they envision a bike path, and we're sort of the main station."

And his idea for the 200 acres, a clustered, car-free subdivision powered by renewable energy, was well received by planners.

It would be affordable housing, said Mr. Rael, and the concept is neighborly: "I love the idea of you parking your car and driving an electric car or taking a bicycle-it's not your drive-in, car-friendly house." But Solaqua will, of course, take some big bucks.

Mr. Rael, who rents a mill building and warehouse space to a few businesses at present, has already invested in shoring up the rooftops and cleaning out the mill. (He declined to say how much he paid for the mill.)

But just hiring engineers to examine the property and create a game plan will be costly, which is one reason why Solaqua is working with Minnesota-based Artspace, which helps provide affordable space for arts organizations.

Artspace has a winning track record with development projects, asset management, consulting services and community activities. These include a former industrial building renovated with the state's assistance in Buffalo.

The group visits Chatham next month to meet with area artists and host a public meeting to discuss plans with residents.

Mr. Rael, who worked as a puppeteer and carpenter before returning from British Columbia in the '80s to run the family business, hopes Artspace's expertise and connections can help get the venture off the ground.

In the meantime, Solaqua's goal of "bringing art to power and power to art" is being realized through the sale of solar electric and wind systems that qualify for state rebates and tax credits.

The company's system installer, who is certified by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, is working on to place solar panels on the new local foods co-op in Chatham village.

Panels at the mill would go up in unusual ways instead of just lining up, said Mr. Rael, imagining panels in wave-like patterns hanging from a rooftop or "beautiful ribbons" on the old water tower.

Standing where huge machinery used to churn out cardboard, he sees the kind of image that keeps him headed towards his goal.

"I'm living for the day I can see some teenage kid pulling a piece of red hot iron out of the blacksmith forge," he says, "and banging it out."

For information on the project and renderings of the buildings visit www.solaqua.org.
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