

*Innovation Valley (www.ivalley.org)*

# Miracle on Merrimack St.

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– Bob Ansin

On less than one mile of riverfront property, the seeds of a new economic revolution are taking root. The world's largest green condo development is underway in the conversion of Wood Mill. This is a 1.3 million square foot retired wool factory that, when built in 1905, was a cornerstone of industrial prowess in America. Today it is becoming the cornerstone for Lawrence's revitalization and helping to set the mold for how old industrial cities can reinvent themselves with green sustainable thinking. In doing so, the project is showcasing the tenacious power of Northeast ingenuity.

“There is something special about New England,” says Bob Ansin, owner of MassInnovation, the developers of the project. “We don't have abundant resources, yet we have a history of making great things happen through the sweat and innovation of our residents.”

Indeed, the residents of New England, and more specifically the residents of the Merrimack Valley, invented the industrial revolution in America, and now, it appears, are at it again.

The former Wood Mill is being transformed into Monarch on the Merrimack, 600 luxury lofts which will be heated and cooled through geothermal power. Sixty shafts, each 1500 feet deep, will be drilled into the earth where the temperature is a stable 55 degrees. In winter, warm deep water is a source of heat. In summer, the process is reversed and the wells become a heat sink to cool the lofts. Geothermal energy significantly reduces utility costs and greenhouse gas emissions; a 1-bedroom loft at Monarch will cost on average \$60 a month to heat and cool. Studies estimate that heating and cooling a standard 2-bedroom home (or a large loft) with geothermal (as opposed fossil fuels) has the same environmental benefits as planting an acre of trees. By this measure, Monarch on the Merrimack has the effect of planting 600 acres of trees. Outside of Iceland, this is perhaps the world's foremost geothermal endeavor, and certainly the largest in a single residential building.



**Model unit at Monarch Lofts on the Merrimack – heated and cooled through geothermal ducts in the back.**

The innovations, however, don't stop there. The Monarch lofts were designed to blur the boundary between indoors and outdoors. Monarch offers a private riverfront park, rooftop deck and gardens, access to the river walk, parks, and play grounds. Heated underground parking is available as an upgrade, as are spaces across the street at the new commuter rail garage.



Additionally, as Bob Ansin sees it, Monarch Lofts will become a community unto itself, a city within a city. There will be a wide mix of units under the same roof - from the barebones artist lofts, to the luxury penthouse suites.

Everyone will take the same elevators: the CEOs and the aspiring Kerouacs. Mixed in with the residential areas will be commercial interests and cultural facilities, including a conference center, spa, and theater. “People will bring their lives with them,” says Mr. Ansin, “there'll be places to go and things to do.”



Merrimack, a silent and somber testament to a bygone era.

Yet today, it is exactly the opposite - a blazing beacon to the power of foresight, imagination, and old-fashioned Yankee determination. Mr. Ansin is overseeing investments of \$200 million into the project. Yes, 200 million dollars privately invested in Lawrence. To put that into perspective, that is equivalent to the entire annual budget for the city of Lawrence itself. The estimated annual tax revenue from just the residential value of the properties will be in excess of \$2 million. That is the equivalent to the city's yearly budget for cultural and recreational services, including the maintenance and operation of all the libraries, parks, recreational activities, and public celebrations. So, to think of it in terms of its new tax base, it could single-handedly double the city's library and parks capacity with enough left over to host a major public celebration. Fireworks anyone?!

And yet, Monarch Lofts on the Merrimack isn't the only miracle. Two doors over is Sal's Riverwalk. This is Sal Lupoli's redevelopment of Riverwalk Mills, which turned a 60% unoccupied warehouse into a 90% occupied business community. As recently written about in The Valley Patriot (October 2006, p. 18), Sal's Riverwalk is now home to the second largest solar roof installation in Massachusetts. Nearly four hundred solar PV panels provide 121 kilowatts of electricity, enough for 20 typical homes, reducing emissions of approximately 2.8 million pounds of carbon dioxide over its expected lifespan.

So, I hope our readers will *Grok* the magnitude of what is afoot. On a little strip of old industrial blight are now two flagship examples of green economic development. One converted mill boasts the state's second largest solar roof installation, and the other boasts what will probably become the largest geothermal condo development in the world. Together, they are a duo of ingenuity that is helping to recast the future for urban life.

If you've ever wondered if Lawrence and the Merrimack Valley would ever again be known for economic leadership, then wonder no more. What was old is now new.

In discussing the Innovation Valley concept with Bob Ansin at the beginning of our interview, I said that the objective was to discover if the Merrimack Valley could once again be the nexus of an economic revolution in America. “I can answer that question right now,” said Mr. Ansin, “Yes.”



Bob Ansin, CEO of MassInnovation, kneels in front of drilling rig next to Wood Mill on Merrimack Street in Lawrence. Sixty shafts drilled 1500 feet into the Earth will provide geothermal heating and cooling for 600 residential units. When completed, this will likely be the world's largest geothermal installation of it's kind.

To understand the scope of this project and its potential impact on Lawrence and the region, consider this: in 1905 when Wood Mill was built, it was the largest building in the world. Its six floors comprise over 30 square acres of space contained under one roof. It has been considered a “horizontal skyscraper,” and if turned on end would be taller than the Empire State Building. Before Mr. Ansin bought it 3 years ago, it was 40% empty and when occupied it was used entirely for storage and distribution. For all practical purposes, it was a massive empty box of no particular cultural or economic value. It was, like so many other mills on the



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The Innovation Valley initiative seeks to help stimulate economic growth and quality-of-life enhancements in the Merrimack Valley. Every month we will report on innovative businesses, practices, and ideas that are helping to make Merrimack Valley the place to be. Look for our article in print media and online at [www.ivalley.org](http://www.ivalley.org).