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Owners seek arts district at historic Yonkers mills

By: [John Golden](#) Posted date: August 21, 2014 In: [Arts & Leisure](#), [Economic Development](#), [Featured](#), [Real Estate](#), [Westchester](#) | comment : [0](#)



Building owners behind a carpet mills arts district in Yonkers are, from left, Harlan Rose, Philip Futterman, Randall Rose, Peter Sanford, Sandra Bendfeldt, Kurt Simonides and George Huang.

A group of Yonkers landlords in the city's historic Nepperhan Valley industrial area have banded together to build upon a tenant base of artists and artisans and brand their collective properties as an arts district that would draw retail businesses and restaurateurs and more arts-focused tenants to their factory and warehouse buildings.

Yonkers planning and development officials, with whom the owners group has been working this year, said they are considering a "tweak" to the city's industrial zone regulations to allow ground-floor retail and restaurant uses at the former Alexander Smith Carpet Mills complex. Bounded by Nepperhan Avenue, Saw Mill River Road, Ashburton Avenue and Lake Avenue, the sprawling, densely built industrial site has been a national historic district since 1983. Tony Lembeck, a commercial broker and vice chairman at Friedland Realty Advisors in Yonkers, who is advising the owners group, said there are about 20 building owners and nearly 2 million square feet of space in the mill complex.

YoHo, a work community of about 80 artists leasing studio space at 540-578 Nepperhan Ave. in the former mill, would be expanded to become YoHo at the Historic Carpet Mills Arts District. The new marketing name was selected by several owners at a meeting in late July.

City officials, though, do not want to allow live-work artists' lofts in the district, as some landlords there have sought.

Sandra Bendfeldt, owner of a six-story, 100,000-square-foot building at 167 Saw Mill River Road, claimed credit for coining the name "YoHo" in the 1980s, when artists began looking to Yonkers and its vacant industrial buildings for less-expensive studio space with easy access to New York City. "I had the idea that it would be good for artists," she said of the mill complex. "A lot of people were attracted but they wanted to live there."

Randall Rose, president of R. J. Rose Realty L.L.C., said his family-owned company is

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converting about 10,000 square feet of its own space into a sound stage in productions at the company's Nepperhan Design Center, a 170,000-square-foot property at 100-530 Nepperhan Ave. that Rose said is fully occupied. He said numerous movies have been filmed on the property.

"They like the architecture of these buildings," said Harlan E. Rose, vice president of the family realty company.

Artists too have shown interest in the property. "I have artists call from Brooklyn," said Randall Rose, "They say, 'We heard you have space available. Can we live there?' I get that all the time."

At City Hall, though, Yonkers officials "have sort of been leaning away from residential" as an allowed use in the proposed arts district, said Wilson Kimball, Yonkers planning and development commissioner. Allowing residential use of loft space in the industrial zone sparked "a really spirited debate" among building owners and members of a city committee with whom the owners group has met over the last several months, she said.

Kimball noted that live-work lofts are allowed in commercial buildings in the city's downtown mixed-use zone that was adopted in late 2011. The city has not yet maximized use of that space, she said.

"We're just starting to get people in on those second and third floors. We'd still like to focus on getting people downtown to live," Kimball said. Artists, too, would prefer to live downtown because of the easier access to the Metro-North Railroad station and New York City, she said.

In meetings with the carpet mill property owners, "Everyone reached a conclusion that a tweak to the industrial zone" would help the Nepperhan Avenue district, Kimball said.

Louis J. Albano, the city's deputy commissioner of planning and development, said artists and artisans in the existing industrial zone are allowed to sell their crafts and products, which include handmade wallpaper and refinished furniture, in their upper-floor lofts and studios. He said planning officials are considering a zoning change that would additionally allow some retail uses on the ground floor of mill buildings.

Those retail uses are still being discussed. "We'd like to keep it to artisans" and arts-related businesses, Albano said. Restaurants would be allowed, he added, and the city has discussed promotional events such as Food Truck Fridays.

Any changes to the city's land use regulations must be approved by the City Council following public hearings.

Kurt Simonides, president of Access Bag N' Pack Inc., said he and his brother and business partner, Alan Simonides, want to open the first floor of their 100,000-square-foot building at 430 Nepperhan Ave. to a restaurant or retail business. "We'll open the first big restaurant on the block," he said.

The brothers' converted arts district building, which they purchased in 1997 from the estate of ice cream franchise founder Tom Carvel, also could offer performance space, he said.

Developer George Huang's Manhattan company, The Heights Real Estate Co., nine years ago purchased the two loft buildings at 540 and 578 Nepperhan Ave. that house the YoHo artist community. Huang, who has actively marketed his YoHo Artist Studios while also leasing light manufacturing and warehouse space, said the community has grown since 2005 from 25 to more than 80 working artists. They come primarily from southern Westchester, the Bronx and Washington Heights, with "a small trickle" from increasingly pricey Brooklyn, he said.

"The outlook started to evolve that this is just a natural fit" for artists, Huang said. "We're the next logical step after New York City."

At the historic carpet mills, "We've been working together the last few months to realize this dream, this goal," said Huang. "We're all pulling the oars in the same direction to grow the arts sector."

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