

Group eyes Log Homes site

By Ellen G. Lahr
Berkshire Eagle Staff

GREAT BARRINGTON — The South Berkshire Community Development Corp. has teamed up with a brownfields investment company and a former U.S. environmental official to usher the New England Log Homes brownfields site back to life.

The Log Homes site was abandoned in the mid-1990s in the wake of a bankruptcy. The decaying property was decimated by a fire in 2001 and is perhaps the town's most unpleasant eyesore in

the midst of a residential neighborhood thoroughfare.

John DeVillars, former chief of the Environmental Protection Agency's New England region and now a development consultant, and Terra-Cycle Investments of Philadelphia are the new partners in the redevelopment plan for the long-defunct Bridge Street site, said Community De-



John DeVillars

velopment Executive Director Timothy Geller yesterday.

The agency, through recent grant awards and other steps forward, is gaining momentum toward a \$1 million dollar site cleanup of the defunct property. The total cost of development is still unknown. Geller said the new partnership is a unique collaboration of people with excellent track records.

"Given the complexities of the site, we have put together the A-team," Geller said. "We have a

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Funds to date

\$193,000 from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, for demolition.

\$200,000 grant from the state's Economic Development Fund, for demolition.

\$2 million low-interest loan commitment from MassDevelopment, for redevelopment costs.

\$50,000 from the state's Economic Development Fund, for market study funds.

\$263,000 in back property taxes forgiven by the Town of Great Barrington.

Group wants to clean up site

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very experienced developer with high 'green' credentials and we have a partner in John DeVillars, who is familiar with and sensitive to the area. He knows the environmental permitting process better than anyone."

DeVillars led the EPA New England office when the federal government negotiated the cleanup settlement that is governing the removal of PCBs from Pittsfield and the Housatonic River.

Tonight at 7 at Town Hall, a Boston consulting firm will present the results of a marketing and feasibility study encompassing both the Log Homes site and the nearby former Searles/Bryant school property, both on Bridge Street.

While the Community Development Corp. privately owns the Log Homes site, the former school property is still in town hands, and the town is nearly ready to seek proposals from developers interested in buying the complex.

Whether the agency's development team might be a contender in developing the Searles/Bryant site remains to be seen.

DeVillars, reached by phone yesterday, said he could not comment on the Searles/Bryant matter, but he said a coordinated plan for the sites would be ideal. "It's very much in the public interest to have a common vision and approach to development and enhancement of all of these properties," he said.

He said the Log Homes project appeals to his particular interest in brownfields initiatives.

"We have a lot of experience and have worked successfully in other communities on brownfields redevelopment, and this site offers

us the opportunity to reclaim a polluted landscape and contribute to the economic development of Great Barrington," he said of his company, BlueWave Strategies of Boston. "Our development partners share our vision and have embodied our values of sustainable development."

The Community Development Corp. has overcome a number of hurdles in recent months, the most critical of which was gaining official ownership of the Log Homes real estate to leverage another \$200,000 in grant cleanup funds from the EPA, and that land transfer happened in June.

The development team has also now coalesced. In addition to BlueWave, Terra-Cycle specializes in "green development" and "restorative development."

That company is headed by Paul Rabinovitch, a businessman affiliated with the Nature Conservancy and sustainable development efforts.

The Log Homes project has already received about \$400,000 in federal and state grant funds toward the \$1 million cost of demolition and site cleanup.

Geller said the state's Economic Development Fund, which also financed the \$50,000 market study, will be tapped again for another \$500,000 in demolition funds.

The project has also qualified for a \$2 million low-interest loan from MassDevelopment, a state-backed finance agency. But that money is restricted to development, not demolition.

Also this year, the town agreed to forgive more than \$260,000 in unpaid back taxes owed on the property. Otherwise, town tax dollars have not been tapped for the project.