

New roof and new direction for Donald chemical plant

Donald landmark to be province's first ever green marketing facility

By Will Jones

It may still look like a wreck to the passerby but the former chemical plant in Donald is slowly but surely coming back to life.

"The building has a whole new reinforced concrete roof, making it a lot more weather-tight and ready to stand up to another winter," says Leora Berman, the brains behind the project to transform the historic building into a marketing cooperative for green technology and trades.

Work on the roof has been paid for with part of a \$47,700 Ontario Trillium Foundation grant. After having the structure assessed by engineers, Berman found that although the building looks rather rundown, the load bearing elements – its concrete frame – are, in fact, perfectly sound.

"The engineers said that the building's concrete structure had actually been overdesigned and so long as we repaired the roof it will stand for another century," says Berman. "And so, all we need to do now is seal the roof and we've got a solid, functional building that we can begin to convert into the Donald Eco-Heritage and Innovation Centre."

Berman is looking for help, either financial or by donation of materials or labour, in order to seal the roof. In return, she offers space in the innovation centre, a charitable receipt and inclusion on the cooperative's website.

Windows for the building have already been donated by local business man Jim O'Connor, who also donated the building itself, and so, if things go to plan, the old chemical plant will be looking a whole lot tidier in a few months time.

In the meantime, Berman is hard at work marketing the innovation centre to potential members (she already has 38 companies on board), creating the website, formalizing bylaws and registering the cooperative.

"Everything is moving very fast," she says. "With the roof repaired and windows ready to go in, the building itself is coming along nicely. We'll soon be able to start renovating the interior. Importantly though, we have received charitable status and we're also progressing well with attracting members and working out just how the cooperative will operate."

Just three weeks ago a steering committee of local trades folk, suppliers and historians was formed in order to guide the membership terms and review the bylaws. This is the first step in what Berman hopes will culminate in the cooperative being registered as a non-profit organization.

The project also has six national and provincial partners, which include the Canadian Industrial Heritage Centre, Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, Cement Association of Canada, Haliburton Highlands Outdoor Association, Haliburton Highlands Stewardship Council and the Forest Stewardship Council of Canada.

These partners have taken an interest in the project for numerous reasons, one of which is the building itself. The chemical plant was built in 1908 and it is one of the only remaining reinforced concrete framed industrial buildings of its era still standing in Ontario. As such, the building is an architectural landmark and an historic site, part of the reason that Haliburton grew to be an important central Ontario settlement in the early 20th Century.

as a hub for businesses looking to protect the environment."

When complete and open, the building will house up to 100 booths on which co-op members will be able to display their business information. Potential clients will be able to visit in person and browse the booths or access the information on-line. As such, the innovation centre will become a one-stop-shop for anyone – from private individual to large company – wishing to find out about and utilize green building technologies and techniques.

The Donald Eco-Heritage and Innovation Centre will become the first ever integrated green building marketing facility in Central Ontario.

"This is a great chance for local firms to market themselves to a large and varied audience," says Berman. "Environmental development is the fastest growing business sector in the world. This illustrates the importance of what we're doing here. And, by offering these integrated green building solutions, we are also greening Haliburton and hopefully creating more work and so more jobs locally."

Berman's emphasis on the local importance of the project, both historically and as a revenue generator, leads her to champion small local firms over larger provincial or national businesses. In calling for assistance to make the project happen she has been approached by various large businesses with offers of materials and labour in return for booth space and marketing on the website.

"I'm hesitating to take these offers for the moment," she says, "because I'd rather take help and so offer the innovation centre's services to local firms first."

Berman is hoping to keep the building off-grid and she's currently talking to solar panel manufacturers. She also needs composting toilets and would like to lay a green roof.

"I'm getting some good responses locally but if they don't play out I'll be able to fall back on assistance from the larger outfits in Toronto."

What just a year ago seemed to many to be an overly ambitious scheme to renovate a scruffy ruin, when what should be done was knock it down, has now blossomed into one of the county's most exciting new ventures.

The Donald Eco-Heritage and Innovation Centre will not be open for business for a while but with Berman's verve, enthusiasm and immense business acumen (she is the woman who almost single-handedly took the Land Between from local interest group to national charity) it will be an enormous asset to the green building industry and local business in the near future.

Those interested in donating services, materials and funds, or becoming members can contact Berman at 705-457-4638 for more information. The project's website will be up and running in a few weeks and can be found at www.buildingbetween.ca.

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The new use of the building makes Berman smile as she describes its history.

The repurposing of the building as an environmental outpost is kind of ironic," says Berman. At the height of its output, the plant manufactured coke for iron ore production and in doing so completely stripped the surrounding land of forest.

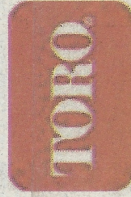
Today, we are revitalizing the same building



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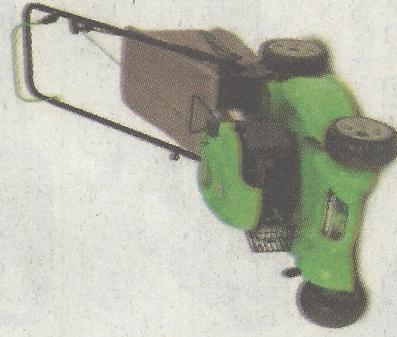
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