

Missoula developer and others are hoping for a rebirth in a former lumber company town



Betting Big on Bonner

STORY BY PAMELA J. PODGER | PHOTOS BY ANNE MEDLEY



This page: Jon Schmautz spent 15 years working at the Stimson Lumber Co. mill in Bonner before being laid off. Facing page: Dennis Turmon, an auctioneer with James G. Murphy Co., calls for bids on Dumpsters during the final day of the auction at the former Stimson Lumber Co. mill in Bonner.

As Montana's oldest sawmill was dismantled piece by piece, auctioneer Dennis Turmon coaxed a few more dollars from buyers huddled against the late-fall dampness along the Blackfoot River. "Do I hear \$300? \$350? Sold for \$400," he bellowed beside a 50-foot conveyer, then shifted his attention to the next item.

The bidders—men and women, many in camouflage jackets and work boots—followed a beefy man carrying a "Now Being Sold" sign. Buyers from across the nation came to these cavernous buildings, now swept clean of sawdust and eerily quiet without the clatter of machinery. They stepped over puddles, iridescent with oil slicks. They climbed stairways into desolate buildings where machinery sat idle. They stepped back in history, to a time when timber reigned in western Montana.

Erected at the confluence of the Blackfoot and Clark Fork rivers in 1884 by entrepreneurs who paid \$100 and a

cow, Bonner had been home the longest continuously operating sawmill in Montana's history. It weathered recessions and a succession of company-town owners. In its heyday, the mill employed about 2,000.

These days, Bonner, which sits a few miles east of Missoula, retains a fierce community pride, but its once bustling character has been replaced by a forlorn uncertainty. The sawmill is for sale, the nearby Milltown Dam has been demolished and a developer from Missoula, Scott Cooney, is buying up most of Bonner and a big chunk of the adjacent community of Milltown. Bonner's potential rebirth—from a quintessential working-class hamlet into a more upscale community—is linked to the \$100 million cleanup of Milltown Dam, which is part of the largest Superfund complex in the nation.

Many people here envision a renaissance of the land and rivers, complete with recreational trails, fishing, boating and other amenities. Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who came ▶



to the sawmill auction, expressed mixed sentiments about the changes at Bonner, which historians consider the last timber company town in Montana. "In some ways, it's heartbreaking to see this equipment selling for 2 cents on the dollar," he said at the mill site. "But now our challenge is to create opportunities to nurture hundreds of families again in this place for the next 100 years. We'd like to replace these jobs with new jobs."

Cooney wants to buy the 155-acre mill site, buildings and equipment, saying he's offered the current owner, Stimson Lumber Co., its full asking price of \$16 million. He estimates that he spent more than \$100,000

at the auction to keep several pieces of the plant intact. If Cooney prevails, he plans to recruit "green" manufacturers in wind and solar energy and specialty wood products as well as a training facility for the University of Montana's College of Technology.

Don Moody, who is handling the sawmill sale for the Portland-based Stimson, said two potential purchasers remained after the auction. He declined to name the would-be buyers.

But the sale of the sawmill faces a possible obstacle—a state-required environmental cleanup. The site's pollution most likely dates back to the original Montana Improvement Co. in 1884, and continued with subsequent owners—the Big Blackfoot Lumber Co. in 1909, the Anaconda Copper Mining Co. in 1910, Champion International in 1972 and finally to Stimson in 1994. Mary Ann Dunwell, a spokeswoman at the state Department of Environmental Quality, says trucking away the sawmill's 85,000 cubic yards of soil tainted with PCBs and other toxins could cost about \$6 million.

This page, top: Missoula developer Scott Cooney, left, talks with long-time mill worker and Bonner resident Gary Tobol during a community potluck. Below: Bonner resident Dale Jarvis worked 32 years at the Stimson Lumber Co. mill before being laid off. Facing page, top: Bonner School superintendent Doug Ardianna worries about Missoula developer Scott Cooney's plans for Bonner. 'Fifty-six percent of my students are on free and reduced lunch. We do not need more houses. We need quality jobs with benefits for families,' he says. Below: Cooney has worked to restore many homes in Bonner like these near the former mill.

That includes removing an earthen berm jutting into the Blackfoot River.

State officials want Stimson to pay the entire cleanup cost, but the company has suggested a scaled-back plan. Jeff Webber, vice president for manufacturing at Stimson, says talks with the state are progressing. "I don't think it is anybody's objective to delay the transition of the plant to a productive facility," he says. "We inherited most of the environmental issues, if not all. It is clear there is a history from the late 1880s to today with a working sawmill on the site," Webber says. "When all the contamination occurred is the subject of a lot of discussion."

Geography played a big role in the little town's industrial development. "Bonner was created at the confluence of two rivers and at the mouth of the canyon," says Dan Hall, a historical researcher hired by Cooney.

Cooney says he wants Bonner's several hundred residents to help shape the community's future and is working to honor its heritage in part by reusing the dam's hand-hewn timbers in some of the houses. He also sees Bonner evolving into more of a middle-income community with a mix of new and renovated houses, apartments and shops. He envisions a designation as a National Historic District.

Last year, Cooney bought dozens of company houses. He's spruced up the sagging 1930s cottages, repairing roofs and painting the clapboard with the Anaconda Mining Co.'s colors of cream with green trim. The developer has a demolition contract on another 27 houses where company accountants and managers once resided. He hopes to buy the land beneath the houses as part of the Stimson mill site sale. He also purchased Stimson's 117-acre log yard in Milltown, which faces the mill.

With local residents anxious about growth, Cooney held a potluck lunch in October to gauge public sentiment

about development on the west log yard, which will unfold in about two years. Some residents say they want a community center, grocery store, health clinic and coffee shop. Others expressed worries about high-density housing and overburdening the Missoula Rural Fire District. "I don't want to see 500 homes out there," says Sue Hess, an area resident.

Cooney says he wants a sustainable, energy-efficient community featuring affordable new homes ranging from \$80,000 to \$250,000. He also wants to give current residents a first chance to buy the renovated mill homes.

Judy Matson, a 42-year-resident of Missoula County who supports Cooney's plans, says she's excited. "It's a whole new frontier, likely the most important we've ever faced," Matson says. "With climate change, a restoration economy instead of an extraction economy is the way to go." ▶



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As kids play in the fields outside his office, Doug Ardiana, superintendent of the Bonner School District, says locals are eager for the next mill owner to create good jobs and to retain Bonner's heritage. "We want to see jobs, not houses," he says. "Most people understand growth and are willing to adapt, but they have huge concerns about how it will change our community. I definitely think that in 10 years it will be hard to determine where Bonner ends and where Missoula begins."

Any rebirth of Bonner must celebrate its timber heritage, says Dick King, head of the Missoula Area Economic Development Corp. "We have to understand that Bonner is a unique community with a history that ties right to the heart of Montana and the Anaconda Mining Company," he says.

In the heart of Bonner's shuttered sawmill sits an old stone warehouse where generations of workers scribbled their names on wooden beams. The roll call ended this spring when the last men and women added their signatures and punched the clock for the final time.

Staring across Highway 200, Dale Jarvis recently stood on the porch of his former company house and stared at the sawmill where he worked for 32 years.

"There's been a mill here for more than a century," he said, "and when it finally shut down (last spring), it was like losing half of my family." ■

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