

Work continues at Hallowell's Stevens Commons before Friday vote

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The controversial \$2.36 million bond proposal going to referendum Friday includes \$600,000 that would fund infrastructure improvements at Stevens Commons, which its owner says are necessary to move the project forward.

By [Jason Pafundi](#) Staff Writer

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Developer Matt Morrill talks about pulling the ivy off the Erskine Building in the background, while leading a Thursday tour of the Stevens Commons in Hallowell. Staff photo by Joe Phelan

HALLOWELL — About a year ago, the 54-acre Stevens School property sat dormant and decaying and was considered an eyesore at the top of Winthrop Street.

But in the nearly 12 months since developer Matt Morrill purchased the parcel of land, its buildings and its road network from the state, the Stevens Commons campus has undergone many changes. Hallowell voters will have their say in the campus' future when they vote Friday on a \$2.36 million [bond package](#) which includes \$600,000 to repair the infrastructure on campus. Many of the projects planned for the campus are contingent on the bond's passing, Morrill said.

Morrill's acquisition of the campus just off Winthrop Street was announced April 26, 2016, thus ending more than a decade of uncertainty about what would happen to the former boarding school for girls site. The state listed the property for \$1.1 million in 2008, but there were no takers. Morrill bought it for \$215,000.

Most of the changes the property has undergone in the past year have been under-the-surface infrastructure improvements. During a walking tour of the property and two buildings Thursday, Morrill said the brick-and-mortar work is yet to come.

In the 9,000-square-foot, three-floor Erskine Building, Morrill and his team replaced about 120 panes of glass and removed what he said was about two inches of pigeon excrement from the second floor. Many of the rooms on the first floor were stacked to the ceiling with boxes of state records, and though Morrill said the state came and shredded the paper, they left all the boxes.

His office for this project and others under his Mastway Development umbrella is on the renovated first floor of the Baker Building. There are six tenants leasing additional office space with two more tenants expected in the next few weeks. Ceiling tiles and floors have been replaced and the interior has been painted.

The changes made outside near the Baker Building aren't as easily noticed.

“We’ve built the first 300-foot leg of the new city streets, we brought in 12-inch water lines, fire suppression with new hydrants, new streetlights and new sidewalks,” he said. He hasn’t said specifically how much he’s already invested in the property, but he has publicly stated on several occasions that it’s more than he’s seeking in the bond. He did say the master plan process was about \$100,000 including the design, permitting and consultants cost.

The developer said he’s made more progress on the property than he thought he would in the first year, but he said there’s been some missed opportunities as well. He said he’s lost a few tenants because of some of the public negativity surrounding the project.

However, now that he’s got tenants leasing office space in the Baker Building and Community Housing of Maine proposing a 30-unit [affordable senior housing](#) facility in the Central Building, Morrill foresees additional developers coming on board soon. But a lot of that hinges on the bond passing.

“The road system and infrastructure improvements (as a result of the bond) is the foundation of this whole project,” he said. “It paints a nice starting point for other people to participate, and it’s already a real project with real tenants.”

PLANS FOR THE NEXT YEAR

Morrill said that, provided the bond is approved, he hopes to have the road network improvements, including paving, completed by the end of this year’s construction season. The project will be put out to public bid before the suitors are narrowed to three contractors during what Morrill described as a “selective bidding process.”

There are plans to hold a school’s class reunion on the property’s central greenspace, which is also where the Hallowell Farmers Market will set up shop this summer. Morrill also said there’ll be an outdoor wedding on that piece of property later this year.

He also expects to work with city officials to help Hallowell and its residents and business owners.

With the Water Street reconstruction project causing downtown Hallowell business owners sleepless nights already, Morrill hopes he and the Stevens Commons property could be of assistance during next year’s construction period. He’s sent emails to all downtown business owners asking about ways he could help.

“If we can help them in any way to relieve some of the angst or stress during (the project next year), we’re willing to entertain that to offer a hand,” Morrill said. Some of the ideas floated by Morrill and Hallowell Board of Trade president Chris Vallee include temporary relocation of some businesses and help with parking and shuttling visitors from Stevens Commons to Water Street.

“Chris has a million ideas and the energy behind it that’s going to bring many of them to fruition,” Morrill said.

THE BOND VOTE HOLDS THE KEY

Many of the good things planned for Stevens Commons — the fire station, the affordable senior housing, the infrastructure improvements — hinge on voters approving the \$2.36 million bond package during the special referendum election Friday. While the anonymous donor who offered to pay \$1 million for a new fire station didn’t specify that the bond must pass, City Manager Nate Rudy said it wouldn’t be feasible or practical to build a new fire station at Stevens Commons without the road network improvements.

In addition to the Stevens Commons and Water Street components, the bond includes \$535,000 for work on rural Hallowell roads, \$300,000 for downtown parking improvements and \$220,000 to begin restoring and preserving the city’s fire station tower on Second Street.

Hallowell resident Ken Young has been the most outspoken at meetings and hearings and [in the Kennebec Journal](#) in his opposition to the bond proposal. He thinks the Stevens Commons component is too expensive and burdens the city with too much risk, but he said the biggest problem is the bond being structured in one question.

He said the council talked about being sensitive and inclusive to everyone in Hallowell as reasons for just a single question, but Young called that a “classic political decision” typically used by Congress or the Legislature.

“They put in a sweetener to ease the distaste people might have for some of the issues,” Young said by phone Friday. “But people want the ability to vote on these questions on an individual basis.”

Young said he doesn’t think there’s a downside to voting ‘no’ Friday because if the bond isn’t approved, the council will turn around and put out several separate questions within 30 days or so.

“Then you can exercise your individual judgment,” he said.

But Mayor Mark Walker disagreed and said the only bond question that would have to be put out again immediately would be the \$575,000 for the Water Street project.

“There is more cost in floating four smaller bonds rather than one large bond,” Walker said. “That’s just not good government.”

In addition to letters and editorial pieces in the newspaper and ‘vote no’ signs around Hallowell, there was also a postcard sent to Hallowell residents last week urging people to vote against the bond.

The letter from an unnamed sender questions the city helping Morrill redevelop Stevens Commons and said it “should be built without your money.” It asks people to ‘vote no’ to avoid a guaranteed tax increase, and it also incorrectly states that when the single bond fails, the council “will be required to separate the projects.”

Patricia Connors spent her own money in January to send [a postcard](#) opposing the bond. Her mailer said Hallowell residents were going to give Morrill “\$1,067 of YOUR OWN MONEY FOR HIS OWN PERSONAL GAIN.” She said the money was a gift and said the city shouldn’t give anything to a private developer. She also questioned Morrill’s motivation, financial contributions and financial stability.

Morrill said he knew this was a sensitive property when he got involved, and he’s been willing to take on the challenges and some of the negative comments that have come with it.

“I’ve kept my chin up through the whole thing, but there have been some punches below the belt,” he said. “It’s hard not to take it personally, and I’d come home and vent, but by the next morning, I’d move on.”

The bond is a topic of conversation around the city and among its residents, Walker said, and he’s been getting a lot of good questions leading up to the vote.

The mayor said he made infrastructure improvements a priority when he got elected a few years ago, and he thinks this bond is something that will benefit all of Hallowell.

“I believe that this bond is an investment in Hallowell,” Walker said.

While Young says he has no idea how the vote will turn out, Morrill is going into it with a positive outlook.

“We have a tremendous amount of support throughout the city, and I see this as being such a positive thing for more than just Stevens Commons,” he said. “There are six other elements that are significantly going to improve Hallowell.”

Voting takes place from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday at Hall-Dale Elementary School on Winthrop Street. Morrill said he’ll be sitting around with his family waiting for the results.

“We’ve been discussing this bond package since the summer,” he said. “It’s exciting.”

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