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Ribbon-cutting held for AAA Northeast at Sawtooth Mill - by Frank Picozzi

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Frank Plcozzi

After months of anticipation and planning, city officials and employees gathered last month for a ribbon-cutting to mark and celebrate the official opening of municipal offices in the Sawtooth Mill building in historic Apponaug Village.

Constructed in the early 1900s, the building was part of the Apponaug Co. textile printing and finishing mill complex. A series of fires in the 1960s destroyed the other buildings, and its water tower was demolished in 2015 to make way for the Apponaug circulator project. The building, known for its distinct roofline, remained vacant for a number of years until it was purchased at auction, for \$875,000, by AAA Northeast in 2018. The auto- and travel-centered company had originally intended to use the space for a call center and to relocate its local branch office; however, the COVID-19 pandemic changed those plans, and AAA leadership began considering other options.

Meanwhile, following a ruptured pipe in the former city hall annex in January of 2018, municipal workers had been displaced to makeshift offices scattered in several locations throughout the city, an engineering assessment deemed the annex was too structurally unsound to be insured, and the decision was made to demolish it. The administration began discussions with AAA executives, and, last year, the city council approved their proposed 15-year lease agreement that allows the city to use roughly 90% of the nearly 40,000 s/f building.

Terms of the lease include the build-out and furnishing of offices, common area maintenance, such as trash disposal, plowing and repairs, and two five-year extensions with the option to purchase at fair market value. AAA engaged the services of R.I.-based McGeorge Architects for design work. In addition to the buildout of the interior, repointing of brick, installation of a new roof with solar panels, new floors and windows, and a geo heat pump heating and cooling system have been completed. Attractive landscaping has been installed throughout the property and also encircles the new upper- and lower-level parking lots. On the second floor, a pedestrian bridge has been constructed to offer access to the building from the upper parking lot.

When visitors enter the main, first-floor entrance, they step into a bright, airy atrium, where the municipal reception desk is located. AAA's local branch/service center operates to the left, in offices on the southwest corner of the building. The city's tax collector, tax assessor, purchasing, and information technology offices are located on the first floor, along with a large community room used for various board and commission meetings and by local groups. Warwick's planning, community development, building, finance/treasury, and personnel departments are located on the second floor, along with the city council office and smaller meeting rooms. Throughout the class A office space, the history of the building is evident, thanks to AAA's efforts. Exposed beams, brick walls, and large windows are all prominent architectural features that have been restored and are still proudly on display.

In published remarks, AAA vice president of branch operations Rick Del Nero noted that many of their members have expressed their appreciation that the building has been saved from demolition. He also noted that visibility in the center of the city is a great benefit, as is sharing the building with

municipal offices, since it provides a convenient place for residents and business owners to do business with the city while taking advantage of the company's services, including Division of Motor Vehicle transactions.

Municipal employees are delighted with their new work home, and the city is pleased to partner with a community-minded company like AAA Northeast. The next time you're in Warwick, be sure to stop in and pay a visit to see the historic mill building enjoying new life in the heart of the village.

Frank Picozzi is the mayor of the city of Warwick, R.I.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540