

The goal for the group negotiating the remodel of the Boardmill building on Bellingham's **waterfront** is simple, but challenging: Make something incredible that is quintessentially Bellingham.

It's a tall order, but something that should be hashed out over the next three months, said Michael Watters, one of the members of BoardMill Group LLC. The Whatcom-based team had what a committee considered the top proposal and was selected to pursue further negotiations with at the Tuesday, Aug. 9, Port of Bellingham commissioner meeting. If negotiations are successful with the Port of Bellingham, it will be presented to the port commissioners for final approval.

The submitted proposal calls for converting the former Georgia-Pacific Building into a hotel with 74 rooms and a convention center, as well as adding a food hub area such as restaurants and residential housing.

As negotiations begin, however, there is plenty of wiggle-room for changes. The group received feedback from port commissioners about a desire for more hotel rooms and a bigger convention center that would attract groups across the nation, so they are keeping that in mind as they fine-tune the proposal.

They've also received a lot of public feedback about the plans. In a telephone interview, Watters said they realize the desire of residents for year-round, public-use facilities and are working on ideas to incorporate that into the designs. Specific ideas have yet to be hashed out, but figuring out ways to have open spaces available to the community throughout the 3.42-acre site is important, he said.

"Our goal is not only to work with the Port of Bellingham on bringing in something incredible but to also meet the needs of the community," Watters said. "We are interested in creating something incredible that is quintessentially Bellingham."

The residential component to the plan is also something that will come into more focus as negotiations take place. Currently, the group envisions two-story pedestals for commercial space and parking. On top of the pedestals will be three or more floors for condominiums/apartments, angled in a way that gives residents maximum views of Bellingham Bay. As of now, the goal is around 80 residential units, but that could change as the group looks more closely at the area, including performing ground tests to see what is possible.

The group itself has local investors, which it hopes will help as they work on final plans. Watters is one of the lead investors and is known locally for operating the Kids' World childcare centers before the Boys and Girls Clubs of Whatcom County acquired the facilities in February 2020. At the time of the sale, Kids' World had 532 child care slots in six facilities on four campuses in Bellingham and Ferndale.

Elie Samuel is also a lead investor for this project. Samuel moved to Whatcom County from Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1991 to open Samuel's Furniture in Ferndale. During his time operating Samuel's Furniture, Samuel invested in commercial and industrial real estate in both Whatcom County and British Columbia, according to information provided in the proposal. He sold the business in 2021 and is focused on real estate development as well as being involved in a variety of organizations, including the Boys and Girls Club. He is currently president of the Downtown Bellingham Partnership.

Others on the lead design team include Raymond Faber of Lynden's Faber Construction and Sean Hegstad of Ferndale's Haven Design Workshop.