

# Teamwork in the Town of Howland Results in a Masterpiece of Environmental Protection and Community Success

BY DAVID M. FITZPATRICK, SPECIAL SECTIONS WRITER

In Howland, there's a 12-acre site at a unique location: the confluence of the Piscataquis and Penobscot Rivers. It was long an epicenter of community and industry in Howland. With a recently launched project, it will be again.

Various small operations used the parcel even before the Howland Falls Company built the first full-scale mill in 1889. The businesses there changed over the years, manufacturing pulp, paper bags, and wooden crates. All those businesses were vital to the community. In 1947, when the wooden bridge over the Piscataquis collapsed, 1,200 workers from the north side were unable to get to work. The state quickly erected a \$400,000 steel bridge to avert financial catastrophe to hundreds of families.

Pine Tree Tannery operated there from 1957 to 1971, when it was unable to conform to new regulations requiring pollution-abatement measures. Since then, residents have felt severe economic pains. But lately, they've been feeling other pains, caused by something those businesses wrought: hazardous chemicals contaminating the ground and, potentially, the Penobscot.

Howland became aware of the problem in the late 1980s, when cleaning up brownfield sites became part of the national consciousness. "Howland became aware the same way that the rest of Maine became educated about the potential ticking time bombs that some of these sites represented," said Town Manager Jane Jones.

Howland owns the 12 acres, and has the responsibility of cleaning up the site, protecting the river, and doing something useful with the land. The worst part is a three-acre riverfront parcel, the site of a chemical-waste dumping ground for generations. Howland had to deal with that land in some way, and it had three options.

For very little cost, the town could merely fence off the property, but that would leave the land forever unusable. "It would have been fenced off and it would have become a monument to failure, or a monument to contamination," Jones said. "And that is totally unacceptable. That's not within the psyche of the residents

of Howland."

For \$4.5 million, the town could remove every cubic foot of contaminated soil and debris from those three acres, replacing it with uncontaminated soil. That would be the best-case scenario, but not financially feasible.

But for \$600,000, the town could remove the most contaminated material, lay down a protective marker layer, and cover the remaining contaminated area. There could be no digging without regulatory approval, but new slabs could be laid down, and the site would once again be usable. In 2007, then-Town Manager Glenna Armour applied for federal EPA Brownfields Program grants. The grants max out at \$200,000, so Armour applied for three separate grants — and got them.

The three-grant solution showed "a great deal of, shall we say, Yankee ingenuity on the part of the people who were looking at the program and trying to adapt a nationwide program to the best use possible for the town of Howland," said Jones.

**"This is an exciting time for the community. It's a cooperative effort among everyone."**

Jane Jones, Howland town manager

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

There are other steps to the project, most notably the \$250,000 demolition of the sprawling building complex, which is falling apart and unusable, or too expensive to make usable. And there will be subsequent projects to beautify and develop the land to make it more attractive and functional.

The abatement will revitalize the land, alleviate river contamination, and create valuable riverfront property. In Howland, all ideas are on the table, and some good ones will be developed. A walking trail will circumnavigate the parcel, with picnic tables throughout, and there's talk of ATV, snowmobile, and biking trails. Ultimately, the town would like to see retail development — perhaps a tourist lodge,

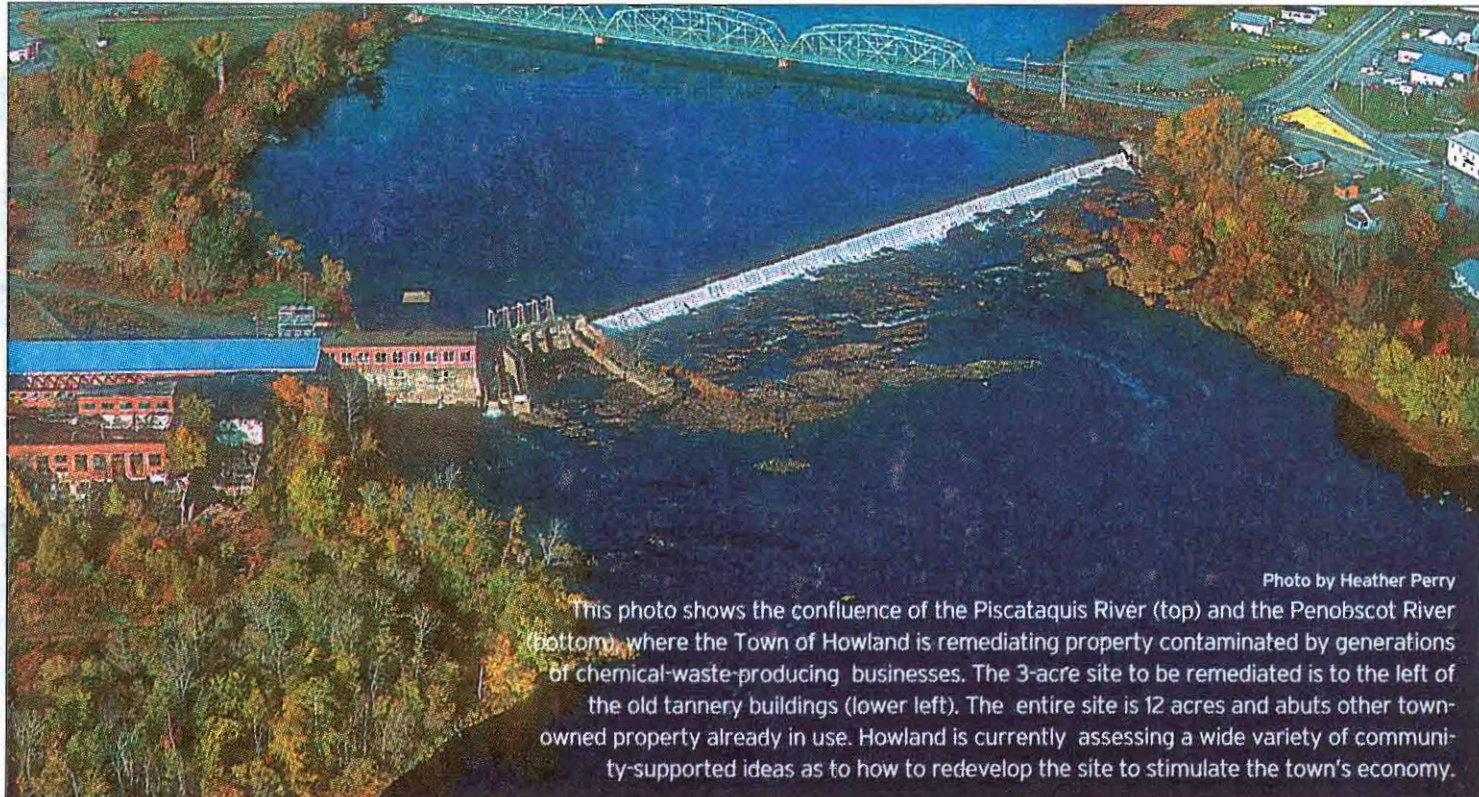


Photo by Heather Perry

This photo shows the confluence of the Piscataquis River (top) and the Penobscot River (bottom), where the Town of Howland is remediating property contaminated by generations of chemical-waste-producing businesses. The 3-acre site to be remediated is to the left of the old tannery buildings (lower left). The entire site is 12 acres and abuts other town-owned property already in use. Howland is currently assessing a wide variety of community-supported ideas as to how to redevelop the site to stimulate the town's economy.

overnight RV parking, a micro-brewery, an information kiosk, or even a stylish restaurant in the dam's old powerhouse, which offers unprecedented vistas of the twin rivers.

future, when the abated site becomes part of the rebirth of the local economy.

## UNPRECEDENTED TEAMWORK

There have been many partners making this happen. Attorney Andy Hamilton from Eaton Peabody, Howland's long-time legal counsel, has handled many issues, such as ensuring the town meets the many requirements for using the stimulus funds.

"What's really exciting about this project ... is that you wouldn't be able to clean up this former tannery property without the jump start that the federal funds provide and the expertise that's provided by DEP, EPA, and good [consultants] like CES," Hamilton said. "With the opportunities come some challenges, but we've

physical remediation, has done this sort of work for 20 years, including abating the contaminated former Loring Air Force Base.

"The unique part of this solution is to incorporate the public input to make sure that when we do put a cover system down that it incorporates those future-use ideas," St. Peter said. "So the walking trail and the boat ramp will be integral to the cover system — which saves money so they don't have to come back and re-disturb contaminated material at a later date. So by doing this visioning now, we're able to save thousands of dollars by making it integral to the cover system."

Also involved is the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, a non-profit that is working to restore 11 species of sea-run fish to the Penobscot watershed. In How-

land also gives it the potential to become an extraordinary centerpiece of community and economic development in the Howland area," said PRRT Executive Director Laura Rose Day. "While the Penobscot Trust's focus is on restoring fisheries, we're also really excited about Howland's discussions on revitalizing the entire site. We are pleased that our work to restore fisheries to the region can be part of this community-led vision to realize the many economic and cultural benefits these rivers can provide."

There have been many other involved, such as the Maine Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Maine Department of Transportation has also worked closely with the team, as the state will soon be replacing the existing 63-year-old steel bridge. The MDOT has taken the site plans and fish-bypass project into account in planning the two-year construction project, and has even worked with Howland regarding plans to reconstruct intersections on either side of the Piscataquis River.

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been happy to support the town as it works through [them]."

With many goals dependent on one piece of land, Howland's community visioning process drives how those goals match up. John Holden of Eaton-Peabody Consulting Group has managed that process. Howland held two public meetings to elicit all thoughts and ideas on how to reutilize the site, and how those three projects can come together and provide unique opportunities.

Denis St. Peter, president of CES, Inc., which is handling the

land, the PRRT will construct a stream-like fishway to enable American shad, Atlantic salmon, and river herring to swim upriver around the dam. The PRRT's project goals are to restore self-sustaining sea-run fish populations; to expand cultural, economic, recreational, and community opportunities; and to re-establish a free-flowing river from Old Town to the Gulf of Maine, while maintaining or even increasing energy production on the river.

"The old tannery site sits beside waterways that are critical

## COMMON GROUND, COMMON GOOD

Jones said the process has been a learning experience for everybody involved, with many groups with diverse approaches coming together to find common ground for the common good.

"This is an exciting time for the community," she said. "It's a cooperative effort among everyone. And the ultimate goal is to reclaim a unique piece of geography, and to be able to utilize it in the future in such a way that it brings growth to the community."



Bangor Daily News File Photo

This photo of the old tannery site was taken in March 1974, shortly after the Town of Howland acquired the property. The NEWS reported then that Howland was pleased to receive such a gift, but the contamination problem was not understood at the time. Now, an ambitious plan will remediate and redevelop the site. The snow-covered area on the left riverbank is where chemicals were dumped earlier in the 20th century.



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For more information on the Penobscot River Restoration Project please visit [www.penobscotrivers.org](http://www.penobscotrivers.org)