

Small

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of course, the new home is different, more modern. It is built to be energy-efficient, with lots of insulation and modern technology like an electric heat pump heating system.

For Bahoosh, who focuses on small houses, the fact that his brand-new house is a good match for the old-fashioned Bayside neighborhood is no coincidence.

“In the 1950s, the average-size new house in America was about 850 square feet,” he said. “Now, it’s about 2,700 square feet.”

That is a lot of space, he said, in a time when American families are getting smaller and more people are interested in having smaller utility bills and less of an environmental impact. Still, Bahoosh is not interested in building tiny houses, which to him means something that is on wheels and is not code-compliant.

“Although it might sound freeing to have a little house on wheels, that’s not my skill set,” he said. “I am a lot more comfortable in small houses. I don’t like to feel cramped.”

David Foley, a designer with Northport-based Holland & Foley Architecture, said that he respects the people who are passionate about tiny houses.

“My hat is off,” he said. “I admire the spunk of folks trying alternatives. It seems to me we need a variety of approaches.”

However, he pointed out some of the same issues with the tiny structures that Bahoosh did.

“So far, few tiny houses are legal in many towns and cities as a full-time dwelling,” he said.

Building them on trailers means that they don’t have to meet all building

codes, but it also means that tiny-house residents are not likely to have a fixed address. That might be attractive to some people, but certainly not everyone. Foley said that he and his business partner Sarah Holland have been working quietly for a little more than a decade on designs for homes that range from a little over 300 square feet to just under 2,000 square feet.

“Somewhere between the tiny house and the McMansions, there seems to be a missing piece,” he said. “I think people are not happy in a bunch of wasted space with a bunch of clutter ... and we don’t need to go down to everybody living in a camper trailer to make way better use of the spaces we have now.”

A couple of years ago, he and Holland decided the time was right to get louder about their small home designs and work to share them with more people.

“We were seeing an unmet need, and a middle class that was under some pressures. We weren’t seeing people designing for them,” he said. “We’re still building these great big things, and we’re not building places where people can grow old in place. In an aging state like Maine, we should be addressing that.”

Bahoosh said that is a concern of his, too. He pointed out ways that his Bayside house utilizes what he calls “universal design,” a way for people of different physical abilities to use the space, such as a first-floor room that could be used as a bedroom for someone who can’t get up the stairs.

“I call it thinking ahead,” he said.

It’s important, he said, sharing a story about a feisty older woman who contacted him because she really wanted to live in a 500-square-foot house, with



sleeping lofts and ladders and with no extra room for her to fill up with her or her adult children’s clutter. Bahoosh said they had many opinionated and enjoyable conversations about her vision and in the end he built her exactly what she wanted. He pushed to finish the house while she was in the hospital for hernia surgery so she could live in it once she was discharged.

But in the hospital, she was diagnosed with terminal cancer and was only given nine months to live.

“She didn’t want to leave her house, but the design made it hard for caretakers to live there with her,” he said. “Still, she had the house she wanted, if only for a little while.”

Foley said that he and Holland also work hard to listen to their clients and to figure out what they want and need in their homes.

“Everybody has a differ-



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Jim Bahoosh of Morrill designs and builds small houses that usually range between 500 and 900 square feet.

ent story. And we want every square foot to have a reason, and a purpose and

be wonderful for people. The main thing is to be thoughtful,” he said. “A

building is just the frame around a picture. The picture is your life.”

Miracle

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But while the property looks all but abandoned, backers of the project insist that’s because most of the work is going on behind the scenes — including, mainly, hunting for investors in Beijing and Hong Kong.

They say the resort is coming.

“Good things take time,” Miracle Enterprise Chairwoman Shi Qi said through representative Tony Yick in an email to the Sun Journal. “And the best things come to those who wait.”

Eyesore to 5-star facility?

When the medical tourism project was announced last year, city officials, Central Maine Medical Center representatives and community leaders immediately hailed it as a boon to the Twin Cities.

The plan called for the Chinese investment group to spend up to \$40 million to transform the old shoe factory within two years. They’d make it and the surrounding properties into a luxury, state-of-the-art health and wellness destination for wealthy Chinese retirees, soon-to-be retired seniors and financially stable middle-aged people seeking medical care at Central Maine Medical Center or cosmetic procedures at the resort. Investors said it was expected to serve about 5,000 people a year.

That meant Auburn would play host to thousands of rich tourists who would shop, eat, travel, play and pay for their medical care — likely with cash.

And one of the city’s worst eyesores would get transformed in the process.

The four-story brick Lunn and Sweet Shoe Factory was built at 67 Minot Ave. in 1908, with additions in 1912 and 1914. Hundreds of Lunn and Sweet workers turned out thousands of pairs of shoes each day, including their claim to fame: Ye Olde Tyme Comfort Shoes.

The 168,000-square-foot factory thrived for decades before being first sold in the 1940s. It would eventually land in the hands of Dan Lajoie.

In recent years, the building became known simply as The Barn, the name of the retail surplus

store housed there, posted on a billboard-sized sign in front of the building.

Enter the Chinese investment group.

Last summer, Lajoie sold the building and the neighboring vacant car dealership at 81 Minot Ave. to Miracle Enterprise for an undisclosed amount. Even run down and falling apart, the old factory building was valued at \$1.64 million by the city. The vacant car lot was valued at \$187,500.

“When we first came to Auburn, we fell in love, head over tail, with the people here, the fresh air, clean water, clean food,” Shi told the Sun Journal a year ago, through an interpreter. “It definitely works from a tourism angle and the site itself meets the needs we have. It is transformable into a medical center with a tourism angle.”

Shi and her investment group had learned about Lewiston-Auburn through Fei Miao, the brother of Bates College professor Li-ping Miao. Fei Miao, a retired builder in China, had been treated for cancer at Central Maine Medical Center and was pleased with both the treatment and the region. He wanted to find a way to bring Chinese patients to Maine for care and asked his sister to keep a lookout for potential buildings. Li-ping Miao has said she looked for more than a year before considering the Lunn and Sweet building.

At the time, Fei Miao said they liked the massive brick building’s history in the community, its size and its location central to the downtown and minutes from Central Maine Medical Center. They also liked Auburn, which offered a four-season lifestyle, a healthy environment and easy access to American medicine.

As envisioned, medical tourists could be sick and in need of high-quality treatment, such as for cancer, or they could be healthy and seeking preventive care, a comprehensive physical exam or an anti-aging procedure. Where would they come from? At that same announcement last July 31, Shi signed an agreement with another Beijing-based group, the Age Doctor International Group — described as a decade-old company focusing on “beauty customization,”

preventive care and recovery from illness for more than 130,000 Chinese clients.

Age Doctor would use its contacts in China to find interested clients and send them to Auburn.

“This is exciting for those in the room, a really historic moment and something that makes it really clear to folks in Auburn and in Lewiston-Auburn that the world really is flat and we’re open for business,” Auburn Mayor Jonathan LaBonte said at the time.

Where would investors come from? The project would rely heavily on the EB-5 visa program. Under the controversial program, a foreign investor sinks \$500,000 or \$1 million into a project on U.S. soil. If that project saves or creates at least 10 jobs, the investor gets a green card, as does that person’s spouse and unmarried children under 21, setting them on the path to U.S. citizenship.

Miracle Enterprise figured a good number of those investors would come to the Auburn project.

In August 2015, the group also purchased the old 1 Minot Ave. police station from the city and workers converged on the Lunn and Sweet building. Around that same time, Shi bought another Auburn property, a house at 13 Lake St., for \$345,000 — \$114,000 over city-assessed value — to serve as a management residence.

Investors went back to Beijing. They returned to Maine briefly in October 2015 with a tour group of potential Chinese investors and possible clients to see the community and visit the site.

Then they went home again.

Waiting

Passers-by since have seen no changes in the old factory building, the vacant car lot or the old police station — at least no changes that would lead anyone to believe a project is moving forward there.

There hasn’t been much obvious progress going on in the background, either. A year into their original two-year timeline, Miracle Enterprise has not taken out any building permits, presented plans to city officials or forwarded designs to their architect, Platz Associates in Auburn.

But Tom Platz, head of

Platz Associates, isn’t worried. He said it’s common for such a large project to take a while, even if investors did originally plan on a shorter timeline.

“I think two or three years for a project this big is absolutely reasonable,” he said.

He feels it’s moving at the right pace, though he acknowledged that he doesn’t know everything going on behind the scenes.

“I have no reason to think that it’s not [on track],” Platz said. “Again, I’m not privy to the business part of this. We’re really just the architects. Like I said, I have no reason to think it’s not, but I’m not over in China, so I don’t know how the business end is going.”

While there have been no permits, plans or designs issued, Miracle Enterprise has stayed in contact with interested parties in Maine.

Peter Chalke, the outgoing CEO of Central Maine Healthcare, which runs Central Maine Medical Center, met with a representative as recently as two weeks ago.

“There is still strong interest in this project,” Central Maine Healthcare spokeswoman Ericka Dodge said. “Considering this is a first-of-its-kind endeavor and the magnitude of the project, things are moving along quite well.”

She said the center’s staff have spent time with colleagues at Massachusetts General Hospital during the past year to learn about serving an international population.

“On the hospital side, we are ready and able to begin patient care as soon as the building is complete,” she said.

Michael Chamming, Auburn’s director of economic development, said he’s spoken to Miracle Enterprise representatives five times this year, most recently in May.

Unofficially, the city will be expected to help with getting building and construction permits, visas, tax credits and relocating utilities. It may also look into expanding Goff Street through the EL-Franklin Woods — commonly known as the Snake Trail behind Edward Little High School — and connecting to Elm Street and Minot Avenue to give the medical tourism building additional access to Minot Avenue.

But nothing has been formalized yet, as the city is waiting for the Chinese investors to advance their business plan.

“Please be aware that to the best of my knowledge, the City has not committed to anything in writing besides the sale of the old police station,” Chamming wrote in an email to the Sun Journal. “Like any other development, we will wait until all of the needed information is provided before we make any commitments.”

LaBonte, the mayor, said the city is working with state agencies to help pay for Auburn’s share of the work, like expanding the road, when — or if — the resort happens.

“To make an old shoe factory function like a building in the middle of a city, you need streetscape and access improvements,” LaBonte said. “That has to be part of the project. So I’ve encouraged staff to engage with state and federal partners so we can minimize property tax outlay. That’s been ongoing, but it’s ultimately up to those folks to be ready to move to city approvals and building permits.”

Several months ago, Miracle Enterprise did ask the National Park Service to review the project to see whether it would qualify for historic renovation tax credits considering the old factory’s past. The park service said it could be eligible, according to Michael Johnson of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. But the next steps require a project plan the park service can review.

When any of that happens depends on the Chinese investors.

In an email this week, Shi said there had been some restructuring — a new company, Lifespring International Holdings Ltd, was formed and is now the parent company for Miracle Enterprise and her other holdings. The Lifespring group has also acquired an unnamed, publicly traded Hong Kong company, which is now responsible for finding investors for the Auburn resort.

Shi said all that change has caused some delays.

“The restructuring has definitely altered the timeline by six to 12 months,” she said.

Also taking longer than expected: finding investors to help foot a \$40 million bill.

A year ago, Miracle Enterprise had expected EB-5 investors would infuse the project with cash, but the controversial EB-5 program will expire this fall. Its fate is uncertain.

Concerned about EB-5’s future, Miracle Enterprise is looking for investors elsewhere.

“Finding alternative sources of funding is important so that the entire project financials are well planned for,” Shi said. “Once the project of consolidating all the finances are in order, and it’s taken a little longer than anticipated, Miracle Enterprise will work closely with Tom Platz and Platz Associates to kick start the next phase of design, planning and renovations.”

Miracle Enterprise continues to work with the Age Doctor International Group, though Shi said Age Doctor’s referrals “haven’t panned out yet.”

“As for what our status with them is, there is also sensitive information as well,” she said. “We did announce that we are in the process of doing due diligence on Age Doctor because we announce the possibility of acquiring Age Doctor altogether.”

Shi said Miracle Enterprise is on the lookout for its first Chinese patients to be treated in Maine.

“We haven’t had any luck with a patient actually going to receive treatment yet, but we believe that the first one will be the most difficult,” Shi said. “Everything in China succeeds by word of mouth, so those first few patients and successful cases are the hardest.”

Early patients could receive treatment at Central Maine Medical Center and stay elsewhere before the medical tourism facility is open.

Although the project is taking longer than initially expected, those who were at the announcement a year ago say they still see its promise.

“I think it holds the greatest potential for both this project and the future for our city than many things that have occurred in the past,” said Roland Miller, Auburn’s former economic development director, who has not been involved with the project or the city since his November retirement. “So I’m really, really hopeful it moves forward.”