

# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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## Stoney Hill Business Park could host over 200 workers

Thu, 05/06/2021 - 1:52pm meganj

By: Christopher Ross



STREET LEVEL VIEW - LOOKING EASTWARD



AERIAL VIEW - LOOKING EAST

Plans for Bristol's 9.6-acre Stoney Hill Business Park, which will be located behind the fire station, call for three buildings totaling 71,000 square feet for light industrial or office uses — space enough for more than 200 full-time employees. Stoney Hill Properties LLC will break ground on the park this summer and expects to complete its first building, and welcome its first business, AllEarth Renewables, in July 2022. / Image courtesy Stoney Hill Properties LLC

BRISTOL — By Kevin Harper's reckoning, Bristol has lost a lot of good jobs because there's nowhere in town for businesses to grow beyond a certain size.

In 2019, Harper reached out to a number of companies that had started out in Bristol — some in the Bristol Works business complex he co-owns — but then outgrew the town and moved on: Aqua Vitea, Autumn Harp, Bee's Wrap, Danforth Pewter, NRG, Silver Maple Construction, Vermont Coffee Company.

Collectively, Harper determined at the time, they employed more than 500 people with good paying jobs and benefits — and all had grown after they left Bristol.

“Bristol is basically an incubator town,” Harper told the *Independent*. “But after a company outgrows 10,000 square feet, where do they go? Not Bristol. There's nowhere for them to go.”

Until now. After a nearly 20-year wait, Stoney Hill Properties (SHP), a partnership





Blittersdorf, will likely break ground this summer on a 9.6-acre business park and welcome its first

business next year.

### **HUNDREDS OF JOBS**

The business park will be located just off West Street, behind the fire station and adjacent to a forthcoming affordable housing project (see story on Page 1A).

Bristol is basically an incubator town. But after a company outgrows 10,000 square feet, where do they go? Not Bristol. There's nowhere for them to go. — Kevin Harper

The site will consist of three light industrial or office buildings totaling as much as 71,000 square feet. A fourth lot will be reserved for shared infrastructure.

“The commercial development can support 300 employees,” wrote the Addison County Economic Development Corporation (ACEDC) in a recent memo to the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development. “Based on surrounding economic activity, SHP estimates that this development will create an estimated 200+ Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs.”

The latest site plan, reviewed last week by the Bristol Development Review Board (DRB), includes the following specifications:

- Building A, at 25,640 square feet, will be constructed first, for light industrial use.
- Building B has not been designed yet, but could be built to suit, up to 21,600 square feet.
- Building C also awaits the design process, but could be built up to 23,760 square feet.
- The northeastern end of a long, narrow Lot D, which runs along the southwestern edge of the site, will contain all the infrastructure for the site's waste- and stormwater discharges and will be used specifically for utilities that the three building lots will pay for at a proportional rate.
- The southwestern end of Lot D contains an area that must be protected because of its archaeological significance. In 2017, the Northeast Archaeology Research Center recovered Native American artifacts from 41 of 345 test pits, including an arrowhead dated from approximately 5,500-4,000 B.C.
- The buildings themselves will be a dark red color with green doors and trim.
- With rooftop solar, super insulation and energy efficiency built in, Building A will have the potential to be a net exporter of energy.
- The septic disposal field area for the entire campus has a capacity of 4,800 gallons per day, which translates into a maximum of 320 employees, assuming traditional domestic sewage.
- The complex will have 152 parking spaces available at full build-out, and will include three solar charging stations for up to six electric vehicles.

### **'ANCHOR TENANT'**

Harper and Blittersdorf have worked together for several years. They're partners in the Bristol Works business complex, which consists of 45,000 square feet of building space on 6.5 acres, and they teamed up several years ago for the Bristol Firehouse project.

Stoney Hill construction of Building A, along with necessary site infrastructure, could begin late this summer, welcoming its first business — Blittersdorf's AllEarth Renewables — in July 2022.

Founded in 2008, AllEarth Renewables makes solar trackers and other renewable energy components. The company currently occupies roughly 45,000 square feet in Williston. The pandemic put a serious dent in its business, but once it completes the move to Bristol, it aims to eventually employ 40 to 50 workers, some remotely, Blittersdorf told the *Independent*.

For Blittersdorf, who founded NRG Systems in 1982 in a spare bedroom and woodshed on North Street, moving his current business to Stoney Hill feels like a homecoming (See story on this page).

to Main Street to make copies of my (wind turbine component) manuals at 10 cents a page. There was a hardware store and a bank and it was a nice place to live. I'm looking forward to getting back to supporting a small town."

Building A will be owned by AllEarth Renewables, but it's just as likely that Buildings B and C will be rented from Stoney Hill, Harper told the DRB last week.

Stoney Hill has interest from a possible second tenant, a wood products business, according to the ACEDC.

Harper didn't sound too concerned about finding tenants.

"Sometimes it takes the first building to go up, and the road and the infrastructure — stuff people can see — to draw more interest," Harper told the *Independent*. "There's no shortage of businesses popping up."

Or of businesses looking to grow.

One of Harper's other businesses, Bristol Bakery & Cafe Wholesale, which produces baked goods for private labels and emerging brands and whose annual sales have surpassed \$1 million, has reached the limits of its space at Bristol Works.

"We can't go forward with the Bakery in the Bristol Works space," Harper said. "We might need to move across town."

Stoney Hill Properties submitted its Act 250 application last month and does not expect any hiccups.

Jamie Simpson, project engineer at Green Mountain Engineering, shared the plans with Act 250 District Coordinator Josh Donabedian and discussed them during a Zoom call, he told the DRB last week.

"His opinion was that this looks fantastic and that he does not foresee any major complications or difficulties with this application," Simpson said. "His comment was literally, 'Applications like these, when they come to us, are like dreams come true for the district coordinators. They make our jobs a lot easier.' So we anticipate a quick turnaround."

#### **FUNDING**

In 2019 the project, in partnership with the town of Bristol, received a \$500,000 matching grant from the Northern Border Regional Commission (NRBC), a program originally designed to help fund projects in northern Vermont counties but which, thanks to U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., has now been expanded statewide.

The NRBC grant will help pay for the public infrastructure needed for the business park, such as roads and water/sewer, which Harper estimated will cost \$1.1 million-\$1.3 million.

It was ACEDC Executive Director Fred Kenney who suggested Stoney Hill apply for the grant, and he's working with Harper and Blittersdorf to find more sources of funding.

"More grants means less financing, which means lower rent for businesses and residents," Kenney said.

When the Agency of Commerce asked individual counties for a list of priority projects that could benefit from the \$66 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding Gov. Phil Scott has proposed for direct capital investment in businesses over the next three years, Kenney submitted a sample list of Addison County projects. The list included Stoney Hill and the expansion of two other county businesses — Vermont Livestock Slaughter & Processing in Ferrisburgh and the Vermont Food Collaborative in New Haven.

The ACEDC and Addison County Regional Planning Commission keep a running list of such projects, Kenney said, so the sample list was "by no means exhaustive."

"A lot of businesses are looking to expand," Kenney said. "We're working with eight businesses in Addison County that are looking to grow and we're trying to connect them to programs."

In April the Agency of Commerce released a memo detailing 40 select projects around the state

(or as it now stands in the Legislature, \$11 million) will be intense.

### TOO EXPENSIVE

Without such funding, however, developing projects such as the Stoney Hill business park would be next to impossible, Harper said.

“It’s insane how much it takes to put up a building when you’re starting with a piece of dirt,” he said. “There’s \$45,000 for archaeologists, \$25,000 for the Act 250 process. Divide site infrastructure of \$1.2-\$1.3 million into three lots, that’s \$400,000 per lot. Who’s going to pay that for a two-acre lot? And that’s before there’s even a building.”

Harper pointed out that the Stoney Hill project was 20 years in the making.

“You have to work at this for decades and then live long enough to see the return,” he said. “The next generation of entrepreneurs needs to know that this takes a lot of time and community effort.”

Stoney Hill has also been a priority for the town of Bristol.

“Bristol has a long history of incubating successful businesses until they grow to a certain point and need to leave because there was no place in Bristol to expand to,” said Town Administrator Valerie Capels. “This much-anticipated project will bring jobs, opportunities for business retention and expansion, and new housing to Bristol in an area that is walkable to the downtown and civic activities.”

### TRAIL NETWORK

Construction of the business park will provide visible context for the “Business Park Loop” of the Bristol Trail Network (BTN), which was constructed over the past few years.

The new complex will require a minor relocation of a small segment of that trail, but that shouldn’t be a problem, said BTN coordinator Porter Knight.

“When the Bristol Trail Network went in it was with the understanding it would make adjustments based on the footprint of the buildings,” Knight said. “This is no problem at all. In fact, we’re incredibly grateful to Kevin as a landowner and developer — he allowed us to put the trail in before construction of the business park because he didn’t want us to have to wait.”

When construction begins on the park, it won’t be disruptive, she added. It will be great.

“The business park has been sought after by the community for decades and we’ll be glad to see it go in.”

Once the high drama of construction is over, Harper plans to work with Knight on trail signage related to the history of the site, including details from recent archaeological findings, “for visitors and workers to contemplate where they are in our heritage,” he said.

### VISION

Harper and Blittersdorf’s vision for the Stoney Hill business park and housing development brings a kind of small-town nostalgia full-circle into a world where managing smart growth and walkable villages will be key to addressing the climate crisis.

For Harper, it’s a vision that has persisted through two decades.

“What I see are young families,” Harper said. “You turn left (from your home in Firehouse Apartments) and head to a job on a commercial site. You don’t even need a bike to get there. On the weekend you turn right, cross the street and watch your kid play baseball at the Rec Park. This is the way things used to be done.”

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# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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## Nonprofits to build affordable housing in Bristol

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By: Christopher Ross



Developers are hoping to break ground for Bristol's Firehouse Apartments by the end of this year. The 20-unit neighborhood of mostly affordable housing will be located just east of the fire station on land that Evernorth (formerly Housing Vermont) and the Addison County Community Trust are purchasing from Bristol-based Stoney Hill Properties LLC. Image courtesy Evernorth

BRISTOL — Someday in the not-too-distant future, a few dozen Bristol residents will likely include some version of the following phrase when directing people to their homes: “Turn at the firehouse.”

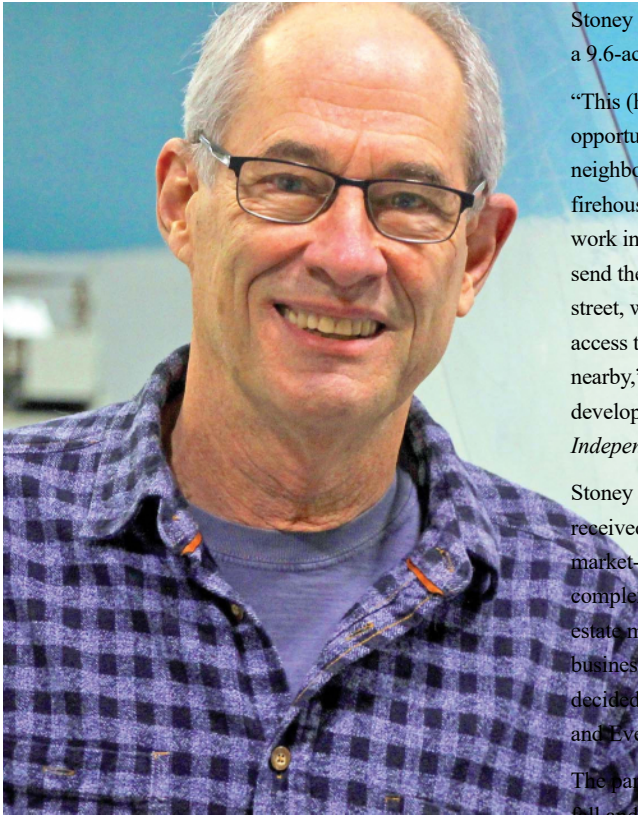
The Firehouse Apartments project, formerly known as the Stoney Hill residential development, is gradually making its way through the design and permitting process. The plan calls for 20 housing units in three buildings off West Street, just east of the Bristol Firehouse. Much of the development will be designated as affordable housing.

“Several of the 20 units will be available to middle-income households (80-120% of the area median income), while the rest will be set aside for families earning under 50% or 60% of area median income,” said Elise Shanbacker, executive director of the nonprofit Addison County Community Trust (ACCT), a partner in the project.

ACCT, which manages more than 100 units of affordable housing in Addison County, has teamed up with nonprofit developer Evernorth (formerly Housing Vermont) to purchase 2.5 acres from Bristol



SAMANTHA DUNN, EVERNORTH



Stoney Hill project, which includes a 9.6-acre business park.

“This (housing) project is a great opportunity to create a new neighborhood in Bristol next to the firehouse where people can walk to work in the business park next door, send their kids to school across the street, walk downtown and have access to the Bristol Trail Network nearby,” Samantha Dunn, a developer at Evernorth, told the *Independent* last week.

Stoney Hill had designed and received permits for 15 units of market-rate housing, but given the complexities of the current real estate market, Harper and his business partner David Blittersdorf decided to sell the land to ACCT and Evernorth.

The parties agreed to the deal last fall and are currently negotiating a

purchase agreement.

In Harper’s view, it’s impossible to build housing that Bristol residents can afford right now.

“To my mind, and my partner David’s mind, this is a much better option in the end, because it’s a mix of market and quote-unquote affordable, and it’s going to provide homes for workers and people who live in town and work in town,” Harper told the Bristol selectboard on April 26. “This is a great opportunity to build tight houses that are efficient, modern houses, and build a neighborhood that most people can afford. We couldn’t do it. We’ve been three years sitting on this, trying to make it happen, and it’s only gotten worse.”

#### **QUICK REDESIGN**

Evernorth and ACCT are hoping to close the deal and start construction by the end of 2021, but they’ll need to amend Stoney Hill’s original zoning permit, which was approved for 15 units.

They’re trying to use as much of Stoney Hill’s original design and site work as possible, Dunn said in a Feb. 18 memo to the selectboard, but a redesign will need to happen to accommodate fixed-income housing and five additional units.

Among the design changes proposed by Firehouse Apartments:

- decreasing the size and increasing the number of units in the rowhouse and duplex footprints.
- expanding the rowhouse structure to incorporate community laundry, a community gathering space, a property management office and private storage space.
- eliminating single-family cottages.

“This site plan allows us to minimize the road required and take advantage of a large open space on the site,” Dunn said. “This open space will be able to accommodate community gardens, a covered pavilion, picnic tables and a play structure.”

For all of this to work, however, Firehouse Apartments needs more land.

As luck would have it, the town of Bristol is one of its neighbors.

“Because the density of the site is currently maxed out with 15 housing units, we would need the town of Bristol to sell or donate some of the adjacent undevelopable land to achieve density

After Dunn, Shanbacker and Harper made their case on April 26, the Bristol selectboard agreed to redraw its lot lines to give the apartment site the acreage it needs. Recognizing that additional units would increase property taxes paid to the town, the selectboard agreed there would be no charge for the adjustment.

Exact details of the transaction are still pending, but Bristol Town Administrator Valerie Capels estimated the donated land is worth about \$5,000.

#### **FUNDING**

The total estimated project cost for Firehouse Apartments is \$8 million-\$11 million, Dunn told the *Independent*, “though with construction costs the way they are, who knows.”

Evernorth and ACCT will be pursuing funding from at least three sources:

- the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, a federal program designed to help create and preserve affordable rental housing by reducing federal tax liability over a 10-year period for owners of qualifying rental housing. “Getting this extra bit of land (from Bristol) was necessary to qualify,” Dunn said.
- the Vermont Community Development Program, which helps communities on a competitive basis by providing financial and technical assistance to identify and address local housing (among other) needs.
- the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, which makes grants and loans for the acquisition, rehabilitation and construction of affordable housing by nonprofit housing organizations.

#### **ARPA FUNDING**

Firehouse Apartments is one of more than 30 affordable housing projects around the state that could benefit from federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding and start construction over the next three years, according to Vermont Commissioner of Housing and Community Development Josh Hanford.

“Bristol is a great location for such a project,” Hanford told the *Independent*. “It’s walkable and there’s a school nearby. And there are other developments in a similar position around the state that can’t get online because of a lack of funding.”

Which is why Gov. Phil Scott has proposed aggressive spending on housing over the next three years, Hanford added.

On April 6, Scott proposed spending \$1 billion in ARPA funding on state infrastructure, including \$249 million for housing.

“Using American Rescue Plan Act funds to accelerate our commitments to develop mixed-income housing, create public-private partnerships to enhance homeownership opportunities, construct permanent housing for those experiencing homelessness, and expand necessary shelter capacity will have lasting effects on the health of our communities and residents,” Scott said. “This plan brings 5,000 units to market by the end of 2024 — the greatest investment in housing in the history of Vermont.”

Those 5,000 units would include:

- 150 shelter units to increase capacity in emergency shelter communities (\$12 million).
- 600 affordable rental units to help homeless households transition out of motels over the next 12-18 months (\$90 million).
- 2,434 units in the “existing pipeline of affordable housing projects,” which include mixed-income rental, homeownership, manufactured homes and improved farmworker housing units (\$90 million).
- 681 affordable housing units via investment in the Vermont Housing Investment Program, helping private owners of vacant rental properties bring units back online (\$15 million).
- 1,135 homeownership units via investment in a new private Homebuilding Program, focused on creating “missing middle” housing for moderate-income buyers (\$41 million).

“Starter homes. We’re way behind because the pandemic drove prices up, and there are young people out there who are worried they’ll never be able to own a home, that they’ll be renters for the rest of their lives,” he said.

### **RISING COSTS**

According to developers Hanford has spoken with, construction costs have increased by \$50,000 per unit over the past nine months.

Indeed, according to a Monday article on Vox.com, lumber prices alone have skyrocketed.

“For years, the price of 1,000 board feet of lumber has generally traded in the \$200 to \$400 range. It’s now well above \$1,000” writes Emily Stewart, who points out the average new single-family home takes about 16,000 board feet of lumber to construct. “A new house that would have cost \$10,000 in wood to get off the ground a couple of years ago now costs \$40,000 worth of wood — assuming, that is, you can even get your hands on the lumber.”

Lumber futures are trading above \$1,000 all the way out to November, Stewart reported, so there’s no reason to think prices will be coming down anytime soon.

At the same time, ARPA funding has a “shelf life,” Hanford said.

“Rather than waiting for costs to go down, and realizing that other states are also flush with money, the time to act is now — get projects funded early and attract contractors,” he said.

### **INFRASTRUCTURE**

Gov. Scott’s ARPA spending proposal divides \$1 billion into five “buckets,” which in addition to housing include economic development, climate change, water/sewer infrastructure and broadband/telecom.

To a certain degree, these other categories are also about housing.

“Housing can’t be solved by itself,” Hanford said. “There’s a relationship between housing and infrastructure, and infrastructure is also expensive. But we need to bring it along, too: broadband, energy efficiency, water/sewer. Housing is where all these issues come home at night.”

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# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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## Energy entrepreneur returns to Bristol roots

Thu, 05/06/2021 - 1:14pm meganj

By: Christopher Ross



DAVID BLITTERSDORF Photo by Shem Roose

BRISTOL — He’s been away for nearly 40 years, but the “Albert Einstein of job creation” is about to return to Bristol.

Renewable energy entrepreneur and crusader David Blittersdorf will bring his company AllEarth Renewables to the Stoney Hill business park upon completion of its first building, sometime next summer. (See story on Page 1A.)

“For me, Bristol is where I started my career in renewables, and it’s why we’re back,” Blittersdorf told the *Independent*.

Blittersdorf moved to Bristol after graduating from the University of Vermont with a degree in

mechanical engineering in 1981. At the time, he was working for a wind-turbine company in Middletown Springs, and his partner was still studying at UVM. They found Bristol to be a happy midway point and rented the house at 44 North St.

There, in a spare bedroom and the woodshed out back, Blittersdorf founded NRG Systems, which manufactures solar- and wind-measurement instruments.

Over the next few years NRG outgrew the confines of their house — and the barn they rented on Main Street to store wind-turbine towers. After passing through Charlotte and Monkton the company settled into its current headquarters on Route 116 in Hinesburg.

It was former Gov. Peter Shumlin, a friend of Blittersdorf, who gave him the Einstein moniker.

“This is a Vermonter that created two extraordinary enterprises in Vermont,” Shumlin told Joyce Marcell of *Vermont Business Magazine* in 2014. “And he is also creating a more livable planet and addressing the greatest challenge people face, which is climate change. I have nothing but admiration for him and the green renewable jobs he’s created. I hope there are more like him in the future.”

In 2005, a few of years before selling his share of NRG, Blittersdorf founded AllEarth Turbines with a focus on wind, which evolved in 2008 into AllEarth Renewables, with a focus on solar.

Currently located in Williston, AllEarth assembles solar trackers and other renewable energy components.

COVID-19 wreaked havoc on the business, which had to reduce its workforce from 40 to 19.

“The pandemic killed 40% of our business,” Blittersdorf said.

Now, with that core of 19 employees, AllEarth is rebuilding — and looking forward to moving to Bristol.

“We’re redesigning our business and planning eventually for 40 or 50 employees,” Blittersdorf said. “And as an anchor tenant in this (Stoney Hill) building, we will be hiring some local people and using local infrastructure.”

Blittersdorf brings with him decades of experience in the renewables industry, having launched or helped launch several large-scale wind and solar farms in Vermont, as well as industry-related finance and engineering firms, and he sat on the board of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG) as it launched a new home-solar financing program that would eventually spin off into the for-profit SunCommon.

In addition, he’s helped fund science education in Vermont, including the endowment of a professorship at UVM’s Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources and contributions to Vermont Technical College in support of its degree program in renewable energy.

And while Bristol hasn’t been a home base for Blittersdorf for a few decades, he still has strong ties there.

He and his Stoney Hill Properties partner, Kevin Harper, are also partners in the Bristol Works commercial complex on Munsill Avenue, and a few years ago the two teamed up to build the Bristol Firehouse.

Blittersdorf is also a managing member of Aeolus Labs, a wind-tunnel calibration laboratory located in Bristol Works that specializes in the calibration of anemometers for the renewable energy industry.

AllEarth’s new building at Stoney Hill will be designed the same way NRG’s headquarters was, Blittersdorf said — efficient, solar-powered, a net exporter of energy.

He remembers when NRG Systems decided to relocate permanently to Hinesburg in 1988-89.

“They laid out the red carpet for us,” he said. “They said, ‘We want them — this is the kind of business we want.’ I want the same thing for Bristol, to be that sort of town.”

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