

Howland gets \$600,000 to clean up tannery

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OF THE NEWS STAFF

HOWLAND — About \$600,000 of \$6.15 million in U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grants funded by federal stimulus money and awarded Monday will allow the town to raze a former tannery abandoned for nearly 40 years.

The town-owned site off Route 6 is among 15 locations statewide that will be assessed for industrial pollutants or fixed as part of the EPA's brown-field cleanup program, U.S. Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, both R-Maine, said in a joint statement.

"It's excellent news," Town Manager Jane Jones said Monday of the grants, which she

said were funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. "There were a lot of people who worked very, very hard to make this possible, and the town is very grateful for their efforts."

An eyesore seen as a symbol of the town's stagnant business climate, the main 150,000-square-foot tannery building hasn't had a steady tenant since 1971.

The three grants that carry the \$600,000 should pay for the cleanup, said Rich Campbell, a senior geologist with Campbell Environmental Group of Falmouth, which is working with the town to redevelop the site. Including former tannery land on the southwest side of Route 6 that now contains town ball

fields, the site totals 14 acres.

Demolition will probably begin within six months, Campbell said.

"The EPA likes to give grants when the entire objective of the project can be completed," Campbell said Monday.

Five times since 1971 the town has sold the property, which overlooks the Penobscot and Piscataquis rivers, but has had to reclaim it when owners left. The tannery site has loomed large in more recent revitalization plans that proponents hope to realize by 2012.

The Penobscot River Restoration Trust plans to build a fish bypass near the tannery site, green some tannery land, raze the crumbling tannery building and dig a channel for the bypass

as part of opening nearly 1,000 miles of habitat to Atlantic salmon, alewives and other sea-run fish now blocked from migrating upstream. The trust also plans to buy three other dams along the river.

Maine Department of Transportation officials, meanwhile, will build a new bridge over the river starting next year.

Town officials, including recently retired Town Manager Glenna Armour, have been working for years on the project. They say the town's portion of the bypass land could jumpstart the Howland economy by being home to businesses or dwellings.

"It gives Howland a fresh start," Jones said. "It's moving from the past, where Howland

prospered and then the tannery site more or less became a monument to that prosperity, to give us a leg into the 21st century.

"It is one of those times in history where everything — the dam project, the replacement bridge, the tannery cleanup — seems to come together at once," she added.

Having started her new job less than a month ago, Jones has some catching up to do, she said. Armour toured the site with officials from a Massachusetts firm in May 2008 to estimate costs associated with razing the tannery, but Jones and Campbell had no estimates immediately available Monday.

Jones planned to discuss the grant with the Board of Selectmen at its meeting Monday night.

A brownfield is a property that contains a hazardous substance, pollutant or contaminant that hinders the potential to reuse or redevelopment of the site. The Brownfields Program assists states and local communities to assess, safely clean up, and reuse brownfields for economic development projects.

The town has designated part of the land a Pine Tree Development Zone. Such zones are part of a state program that offers tax breaks and other incentives to developers that bring jobs into the area.

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