

## Mill site just what NIC, corridor plan needed

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There are property deals, and there are property deals. The one that the North Idaho College Foundation finalized this week rises to what Coeur d'Alene Mayor Sandi Bloem characterizes as having legacy proportions.

For \$10 million, the foundation acquired the 17-acre site of Stimson Lumber Co.'s former DeArmond Mill, which is immediately significant for NIC's growth needs. But it's also something of a linchpin for the long-discussed higher education corridor that now seems more of a sure thing, even though it will take years to build out.

Future generations may be the chief beneficiaries, but higher education in Kootenai County is under pressure for expansion now. Without the mill site, however, that's a problem. NIC President Priscilla Bell says the two-year school was "land- and lake-locked" until the foundation's purchase, coupled with a lease to the college, provided space for growth.

Bell predicts construction will be under way there within five years on a joint-use building that all the projected corridor partners – NIC, the University of Idaho and Lewis-Clark State College – will be able to use, including four-year and even postgraduate programs.

On the surface, the mill site is a modest part of the envisioned corridor, which will stretch north from the current NIC campus along Northwest Boulevard and permit the three schools to collaborate on a comprehensive package of offerings. It will give the fast-growing Coeur d'Alene/Post Falls area the stature of a four-year school while affording UI and LCSC relief from their own capacity challenges. Without the newly acquired 17 acres, though, the corridor concept would be iffy.

Higher education officials had their eyes on the DeArmond site for several years before it became available at a below-market price in 2006. The three years it took to engineer a deal, thanks eventually to the NIC Foundation, was time well spent.

All of which sets the stage for an upcoming civic event in Coeur d'Alene. Under a coveted grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a team of planners will be in Coeur d'Alene Aug. 11-13 to help the schools and the community develop a vision for how the corridor should look when complete.

Until this week, such a visioning event might well have been dismissed as an exercise in dreamy idealism. It now seems clearer than ever that the dream will come true.