Change is foundation of Hastings' projects

By Mary Ford

Wed Nov 21, 2007, 01:27 PM EST

HINGHAM - Tom Hastings never picks simple projects.

From refurbishing historic properties like the Ebenezer Gay House and the Langley-Nye Tavern on North Street in downtown Hingham to developing the Hersey House property that has been taking years — Hastings always seems to be in the middle of controversy.

No sooner is one project off the drawing board, and then Hastings is back with another. In fact, a quick check of the newspaper archives reveals Hastings' name has appeared 190 times in Hingham Journal stories and opinion pieces over the past four years.

One of developer Tom Hastings' latest ventures, BackRiver, consists of 45 townhomes on the Back River off Beal Street.

"I am an agent of change," says the long-time Hingham resident who has been a developer in town for the past 30-35 years.

Many might ask: "why bother?" But no matter what the current challenge is, Hastings is determined and does not give up easily.

"I get the job done," he said, adding "controversy evaporates every time I complete a project."

What also keeps him coming back is his pride in his projects and a sense of accomplishment. Hastings, 55, will quickly enumerate the developments he has completed in Hingham and other South Shore towns, including Leisurewoods in Rockland and Oceanwoods in Duxbury.

One of his latest endeavors, the Back River Townhomes, which overlook Bare Cove Park and the Back River, is quintessential Hastings. It is innovative, including "green" design features such as sound-baffling wall insulation and stormwater recharging system, and the approval process has not been for the faint of heart.

When it comes to Back River Townhomes whose skyline is now part of the Beal Street horizon, it is hard to imagine anyone but Hastings would have the determination and perseverance to clear all the hurdles needed to get that project off the ground. A complicated land swap, the involvement of Town Meeting and the state Legislature, site remediation, and helping to bring the now, state-of-the-art Beal Street playing fields to fruition is just a quick overview.

Hastings' development agreement with the town is valued at $5 million including site cleanup, ballfields, clubhouse (lighting, dugouts, scoreboard), parking lot for 100 cars, and five affordable units.

But to Hastings, it all seems to have been worth it. On a recent tour in a golf cart around the townhouses that are under construction, Hastings' enthusiasm was evident. However, he seemed just as proud of his new luxurious townhomes with views of the Back River and Bare Cove Park, as he is of the new lighted, playing fields and field house that abut the site.

Beal Street is the northwest gateway to Hingham but with a shopping plaza, some industrial sites and an out-dated playing field — it had not projected the same image as historic Main Street, which welcomes visitors into town from the south.

However, today not only is Beal Street changing but so is Hingham as a whole. Hastings says Hingham is becoming to the South Shore, what Marblehead is to the North Shore and what Wellesley is to the metro-area. He said every five years he has seen the level of sophistication in Hingham ratchet up. "No we are on a par with those other two elite areas," he said.

In fact, Hingham can go one better. Hingham has both the proximity to Boston of a Wellesley and the waterfront of a Marblehead. "The train was the final piece," he said.

In an otherwise slow market, Hingham home sales are up 40 percent year-to-date and prices are about level across the board, Hastings says.

Hastings says his Back River Townhomes, which broke ground a year ago, is a great example.

"Back River has enjoyed unprecedented sales despite all the doom and gloom about real estate in the newspapers," he said. "We sold 50 percent pre-construction." And that was without a model home.

Hastings has built more than 100 homes in town including Fulling Mill Lane, Olmsted Drive and Alexandra Way, and Hingham Commons, the town's first cluster development. However, he said Back River is the first project of his that has had significant presales.

Within five minutes of his Back River development, residents can walk to the commuter boat and soon, the movie theater planned as part of the Shipyard project. They could also walk through Bare Cove Park to the West Hingham train station and the South Shore Country Club off South Street.

Hastings proudly describes Back River as the first luxury townhouse development on the South Shore in some time. He mentioned the Meadows in Hingham (next to the high school), Spinnaker Island in Hull, Dreamwold in Scituate and Oceanwoods in Duxbury, which all came on line in the mid-1980s. "In 2007, there is a tremendous need for a new generation of townhome," he said.

Hastings said Back River has proved there is a demand for people who want to downsize in terms of square footage of their home but not in terms of functionality of space, quality and amenities. A number of those buying the townhouses are from Hingham.

Jim Claypoole of Pinecrest Road said he and his wife, Barbara, and were attracted to BackRiver in the initial instance because of the unique exterior design, which they likened to a Nantucket flavor.

"Another special design feature is large amount of sunlight entering the unit by way of large windows and a magnificent skylight," Claypoole said. "This design imparted a special character to the property, not common in condo developments. We were also familiar with the high quality of construction for which Hastings is well known. The remaining factor was the square feet of livable space. We were looking for 3,000 to 3,500 square feet. All three of the above considerations led us to select BackRiver."

In fact the Claypooles' and other residents' views of the Back River and Bare Cove Park won't ever been impeded by dirty windows. The windows at the development have an electro-static charge so they never need washing.

The townhomes start at $825,000 but most are well over $1 million once upgrades are included.