



Bagg's Square West awakens from long slumber

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UTICA — The most recent downtown neighborhood to break out of years-long stagnation appears to be the block that hosts the National Distance Running Hall of Fame.

Major renovation projects will lead to three food establishments that are expected to open before year's end, and the historic but crumbling Hayden Building at 96-98 Genesee St. is about to have a new owner with big plans.

Could this and other downtown projects be the beginning of a large-scale turnaround seen in other cities?

"I bought my property there years ago thinking it would be the area that would be Utica's Armory Square," said Lynne Mishalanie, referring to the thriving historic district in Syracuse that was redeveloped in the 1980s.

Mishalanie, founder and executive director of Utica Monday Nite, bought her property at 106 Genesee St. in 1998.

The area is referred to as Bagg's Square West – distinct but close to the Bagg's Square East neighborhood surrounding the Boehlert Center at Union Station.

That neighborhood is emerging slowly from its doldrums – with major, mixed-use development projects either in-process or finished in at least three buildings and several restaurants being developed.

At the same time, a block of four buildings on nearby Bleecker Street once slated for demolition has come alive, featuring several bars, a karate studio, offices and residential space all in various stages of development.

Ball finally rolling

It hasn't been easy in Bagg's Square West – which also contains a subsidized apartment building, a strip club and a rent-to-own store.

But city officials say they're excited about the progress, and are seeking to develop a streetscape plan to cover everything from sidewalks and lighting to parking and better access to the buildings.

"This is a lot of private entrepreneurship taking charge to make things happen," city Senior Planner Dana Crisino said. "It's an area that can really explode in the future and hopefully become a new hot spot in the city."

That's good news to Frank Elias, owner of Utica Coffee Roasting Co., a retail and wholesale coffee business he has operated at 92 Genesee St. for more than five years.

Elias just recently started opening the store regularly to retail customers again – and said he can see expanding those hours as the new projects come online.

"I see these storefronts being an attractive welcome to the city," he said. "I see them being complementary to the image that Utica has in regards to independent businesses and restaurants."

The Tailor and the Cook

The former Resonance Center at 94 Genesee St. was purchased for \$50,000 in July by Chris Talgo, owner of the Nail Creek Pub and Brewery on Varick Street, and Tim Hardiman.

They are working to develop the one-story building into a restaurant called The Tailor and the Cook, that combines a casual feel with quality local food.

They have stripped it down to its original brick and are enforcing their emphasis on local goods as stringently as possible.

"We're doing what we hope patrons will be doing when we open up," said Hardiman, who expects a mid-November opening for the restaurant. "It's going to be the finest dining experience in Utica."

Talgo said the project started after he realized the untapped potential of the neighborhood.

"When I saw this area, it really blew my mind that it was not developed yet," he said. "Obviously, we weren't the only ones with the same feeling."

Evoking the 1930s

Mark Mojave and his wife, Susan, are nearing completion of a first floor, speakeasy-style venue they've developed at the corner of Liberty and Hotel streets.

The couple also renovated the second-floor of the building, at 16 Liberty St., into a high-end loft that already is rented out, and plans turn the third and fourth floors into a two-story apartment.

Mark Mojave – who credited his wife with the reviving the 19th century building's original stylistic flourishes – said the tavern has been stripped down to its original cherry hardwood floors, art deco lighting and tin ceiling.

"Really, the building still has a lot of the original character and charm that it had," he said.

The tavern is expected to be open by late December, he said.

Last chance for historic building

Vinnie Ficchi, a co-developer of the Doyle Hardware building and owner of a local heating and air conditioning business, might be the last chance for the Hayden Building, at 96-98 Genesee St.

The city took the building for unpaid property taxes from former owner Joseph Vitale, and the Urban Renewal Agency is preparing to sell it to Ficchi for \$1,000. The council will vote on that sale at its next meeting.

The problems there are significant; deterioration extends to the roof, windows and chimneys and there is no electricity or plumbing.

But Ficchi is resolved to guard it from the elements this winter and come up with a viable plan to restore the building.

"I really want to do this building, and you can be assured it will be done right," said Ficchi, who hasn't yet decided what kind of development it will be.

Ficchi said he was motivated by his reception from his fellow developers on the block, and by the potential he sees there.

"I think it's really going to be a shining spoke in the wheel of dressing up downtown Utica," he said.

The building is the site of a famous escape by two black men in the 1830s who were targeted by Virginia slave catchers, according to the Oneida County Historical Society.

Those slave catchers brought the men to the law office of county Judge Chester Hayden and detained them there. But while Hayden was at court, a crowd of black men from Post Street beat the slave catchers and freed the two men, who escaped.

Utica College expressed interest in establishing a museum and seminar space in the building in February 2010, and Ficchi said he was open to exploring that option with the college.

California dreamin'

It's been a challenging endeavor, but Master Pizza will be open at the newly renovated 100-102 Genesee St. by November, said Vitaly Verenich, who came to Utica as a refugee from Belarus almost 22 years ago and plans to run the business with his family.

Verenich purchased the building in September 2009 for \$23,000.

Verenich said he and his brother got the idea from family members in California, and came to see the potential in the four-story Bagg's SquareWest building.

"The idea is to start off doing basic pizza, subs and salads, and later on maybe be adding more things to the menu," Verenich said.

Verenich said the plan is to eventually start developing the upper stories of the building, possibly with a business on the second floor and condominium-style residences on the top floors.

Mayor David Roefaro said the block's development has been aided by city marketing – reaching out to potential developers.

"The fruits of our labor are now paying off," the mayor said.

Contributing: Cassandra Baber, O-D

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