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What's up downtown?

Construction projects are changing the heart of Roanoke.

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Amid the cacophony of sirens, traffic, chatter and church bells that make up downtown Roanoke's soundtrack are the buzzing of table saws and the pounding of hammers.

In addition to this year's more publicized projects, such as the renovations to the Roanoke City Market Building and Center in the Square, a number of other construction projects are changing the heart of the city.

Among them: residential and office condos at the Giles Bros. Furniture building on Campbell Avenue; apartments at 209 First St.; a restaurant and apartments at the former Billy's Ritz building; a mix of apartments and retail — including a grocery store — at Sixteen West on Church Street; and The Inn on Campbell, a bed and breakfast.

Those projects are among several others, including the renovations at the old Woolworth's building on Campbell Avenue and the Lofts at West Station on Salem Avenue, that will increase the selection of downtown residential, office and retail spaces.

Downtown Roanoke has seen its population surge from fewer than 50 residents in 2000 to more than 600 in 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The arrival of new businesses and the expansion of the Jefferson College of Health Sciences show the need for more downtown living spaces, more retail and more office space, Roanoke City Manager Chris Morrill said.

He's excited to see local, private investors taking an interest in restoring downtown, especially during a recession when financing has become more difficult to obtain.

"To have the local investors seeing the strength here says a lot," Morrill said.

Here is a look at the plans and progress of some of the downtown projects.

Billy's Ritz building

Work that began three years ago to bring back a restaurant on the first floor of the Billy's Ritz building and create apartments above should be complete by summer.

Restaurateur Roger Neel and attorney Neal Keese paid \$1.7 million in 2008 for the Salem Avenue building and an adjoining building.

Their original plan called for a boutique hotel, but the project stalled when the recession hit.

The current blueprints show a restaurant on the ground floor and 11 one-bedroom apartments on the second, third and fourth floors.

Keesee did not respond to several requests for an interview, so details about the restaurant, including what type of food it will serve and when it might open, are unclear.

According to construction meeting notes kept by the city's Department of Building, Planning and Development, the restaurant is scheduled to have its temporary certificate of occupancy by December, indicating that it might be ready for business soon after.

The entrance to the restaurant has been moved from the corner of Salem Avenue and Market Street to Market Street.

The restaurant will have two dining rooms on the first floor and seating in an outdoor courtyard next to the Taubman Museum of Art. A large dining room on the second floor will be used for special events. Some features, such as dark wood paneling and the original oak bar, will look familiar to those who ate at Billy's Ritz.

On the second, third and fourth floors, walls are framed out for the apartments, which range from 535 to 816 square feet and have views of the Roanoke City Market Building and the museum.

Robert Rigatti, president of Structures of Roanoke and general contractor on the project, said the apartments might be ready as early as March.

He said the project was prolonged because of the owner's change of plans, and because of the state of the building. The floor joists had to be replaced on each floor, he said.

Work is moving along now, Rigatti said.

"It'll look very finished here very quickly," he said Wednesday.

The Inn on Campbell

On their first date four years ago, Keith and Cindy Hummer talked about opening a bed and breakfast.

They tossed the idea around and even considered buying property in Maine.

Keith Hummer's construction consulting business took a hit when the recession started, and the Hummers began thinking of ways they could combine Cindy's interior design experience with Keith's construction knowledge to create a new income.

It was then that they realized that the perfect location for the bed and breakfast was the downtown Roanoke building where they live and work.

At the time, the first floor of the three-story building at 118 Campbell Ave. S.W. housed the offices of Hummer Construction Resources. The couple lived on the second and third floors.

They used their savings to convert the offices into their new living space with an airy layout, loft offices and a bedroom with a walk-in closet. When that space was complete, they moved downstairs and began focusing on the second and third floors, where they converted a walk-in closet to a bathroom and extended a wall.

The Hummers wouldn't say how much they've spent on the bed and breakfast, but building permits filed with the city valued the construction work at \$100,000.

The second floor of the bed and breakfast has a kitchen where the Hummers will cook breakfast for their guests, a dining room, a sitting room with books and DVDs, and the Campbell Suite, a bedroom with an attached office and sleeper sofa that will rent for \$149 a night during the week and \$179 on weekends.

The third floor has two more bedrooms. The Kirk Alley Suite, which has a gas fireplace and access to a hot tub, will rent for \$179 a night during the week and \$219 on weekends. The Palladian Room, which features a table for dining or meetings, will rent for \$209 during the week and \$239 on weekends.

Cindy Hummer designed the bedding and window treatments and said she hopes the look will appeal to guests and bring her interior design business, Nido, more customers.

The Inn will open by late November or early December.

Sixteen West

The Sixteen West project promises to turn an old S&W Cafeteria — more recently the Downtown Sports Club — into a retail hub for downtown workers and residents.

A grocery store, restaurant, coffee and smoothie bar are among the amenities that will be available to the public on the first floor when the building opens Feb. 1.

"I've known for years that a downtown grocery store was missed," said John Garland, president of Spectrum Design, who owns the building with three partners.

They paid \$425,000 for the 37,000-square-foot building and said the renovations will cost about \$2 million.

The grocery store will carry local, organic products, Garland said. A group of investors is financing the store.

The restaurant, Cork and Crust, will serve wood-fired pizzas, wine and beer. It will be run by Comfort Cuisine, which also will offer carryout meals from inside the grocery store.

The first floor also has open seating for diners and 300-square-foot vendor stalls that haven't yet leased. Garland said they'd be ideal spaces for a flower shop, a cheese and wine shop, or a salad or soup bar — ideas he's heard from downtown residents.

The building might also include a pharmacy, Garland said.

Carilion Clinic has announced it will move its RAC Xpress fitness center, formerly Zoom Fitness on the Go, to the mezzanine of Sixteen West. The fitness center is slated to open in December.

The building, which kept its art deco look, also has eight one- and two-bedroom apartments. They rent for \$850 to \$950. Garland said he advertised the apartments once on Craigslist and leased them all. They have been occupied since June.

Giles Bros. Furniture

First a furniture store and then a Leggett department store, this building at 108 Campbell Ave. S.W. is being divided into spaces for retail stores and office and residential condos.

The most visible changes are the restoration of the Giles Bros. Furniture sign on a new facade, and fresh paint.

"We took it back to the look of what it was at the turn of the century," said Garland, who bought the building with Ken Ferris for \$252,000 at an auction in 2009.

They are spending about \$1.5 million to renovate the building, Garland said.

Two small retail spaces anchor the front of the building. Behind it are four office spaces that share a conference room, kitchenette and restrooms. Those spaces are for lease.

Three-bedroom residential condos are for sale on the second, third and fourth floors. They are 2,005 square feet and are selling from \$350,00 to \$395,000.

Interior work will begin as each of the condos is sold. Garland said he is in negotiations with two buyers.

Residences at 209 First St.

This four-story building just around the corner from the Giles Bros. Furniture building will house 12 apartments.

Garland and Ferris bought the building at the same time as the furniture building; the two were at some point connected when it was Leggett department store.

Garland described the apartments as "a little bit upscale from what's been done downtown."

They'll include gas stoves, gas fireplaces and modular kitchens. They'll also keep the historic look with hardwood floors, plaster walls and high ceilings.

The one- and two-bedroom apartments will range from 590 to 1,160 square feet and lease for \$650 to \$1,295.

Exterior work to restore the facade has already started. A building permit valued that work at \$79,500. Interior work should begin soon, Garland said, and the apartments will be ready early next year.

Garland expects the project to cost about \$2 million.

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