

COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

Spectrum shaping up 2nd project

By Brian R. Ball – Business First - Jun 21, 2004

The development group that turned an old telephone switching office into the Connexions Lofts has plans for another residential conversion project in downtown Columbus.

William Shelby and Jack Hoopes of Spectrum Properties plan to turn the plain five-story office building at 221 N. Front St. into as many as 53 loft condominiums. The 94,000-square-foot brick structure was built in the 1940s.

But the \$9.5 million project, named EcleXion Lofts, could get bigger.

The developer has tentative plans to add up to three floors, which could push the number of condos to 89. The addition could sport a contemporary design twist.

"We're pretty early in the design phase," Shelby said. "We have all of these ideas out there, but what we end up with might be different."

The building could be ready for buyers by late 2005.

The project's 1,100-square-foot, one-bedroom condos would begin at about \$150,000. The developer has not set top prices for the 1,600- to 2,500-square-foot units.

Among the project's quirky elements is the planned transformation of the building's loading dock into a 1,800-square-foot residence, with the truck docking area serving as a sunken living room.

"It'll be very eclectic," Hoopes said.

The project has its eye on the same prospective buyers that most downtown housing developers are targeting: Young professionals and adults whose children are raised and out of the house.

Making it work

Spectrum and project architect Jonathan Barnes are expected to unveil the basic renovation plan and two expansion options during the Columbus Landmark Foundation's City Hop and Showcase of Downtown Living tour set for June 18-19.

The tour is expected to give the project's partners and architect a chance to ask City Hop visitors their opinions about the plans.

"They have an opportunity to talk with prospective buyers and see what they have to say," said Bob McLaughlin, the city's downtown development administrator. "It's only interesting and feasible if people will buy."

Barnes said design cues for the proposed additions to the top of 221 N. Front come from the neighboring office buildings and parking garages.

"If we decide to go up, that really follows a national trend in urban centers," he said. "They do that a lot (top older buildings) in Europe."

Barnes has already brought the combination of old and new to Columbus with his design of a 12-story addition in the Brunson Building loft conversion project at 145 N. High St. The addition of 900-square-foot floors provide a dramatic contrast to the century-old office building.

The concept for 221 N. Front St. includes opening up the north side of the building with large glass panels. The panels would also serve as the predominant design element of the additions Barnes proposes.

Ground-level condos on the north side would include patios extending from the units, while residences above would have 6-foot-deep balconies cut into the building. The patios and balconies would give the residents access to the outdoors, Shelby said, a feature available only to three Connexions units.

The sidewalks along North Front Street between West Spring Street and West Nationwide Boulevard bear sporadic activity, but Shelby said he thinks there are enough services nearby to make the site attractive for residential development.

A deli is expected to reopen this year at 215 N. Front St., when Nationwide's Gates McDonald affiliate moves in. A fast-food restaurant, barber shop and other services are available at the Three Nationwide Plaza tower across North Front Street.

"You're within a two-minute walk of the (Nationwide) arena and surrounding amenities, eight minutes to the North Market and 10 minutes to the (Capitol) Square," Shelby said.

Spectrum's decision on an expansion of the project could come by July or August.

Arena neighborhood

The Connexions project helped launch downtown's first wave of tax-abated housing projects. Its success emboldened other developers to follow with a second wave of projects, including developer Kyle Katz's Buggyworks on West Nationwide Boulevard.

Spectrum bought the EcleXion property in May from Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. for \$1.44 million.

Nationwide had acquired the building in June 1998 as part of its \$17.1 million purchase of 221 N. Front St., 215 N. Front St. and a parking garage from American Electric Power Company Inc.

AEP left 221 N. Front St. last year.

Brian Ellis, president of Nationwide Realty Investors, said the lead developer of the Arena District never made redevelopment of 221 N. Front a priority. Nationwide Realty has concentrated on the district's office and entertainment projects and the 252-apartment Arena Crossing complex and a 98-unit condo project.

"We have said all along that we think the Arena District is going to be a great neighborhood with people there 24/7," he said. EcleXion Lofts "is supportive of that vision."