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# \$23 million Connell Building downtown project back on track

BY JAMES HAGGERTY (STAFF WRITER) / PUBLISHED: APRIL 14, 2010

The long-awaited, rehabilitated Connell Building could make its commercial re-emergence this fall.

"All the funding is in place," Linda Aebli, director of Scranton's Office of Economic and Community Development, said Tuesday. "It's finally under way."

The \$23 million project at 129 N. Washington Ave., which will include 89 rental units on the upper five floors and a retail-office blend on the bottom three levels, will revive the former premiere office building, which has been vacant for years.

"The game plan is to open in October," said Charles Jefferson, a partner in Scranton Connell LLP, which owns the 168,000-square-foot landmark that was built in 1886. "You'll see some folks in there over the next week or so. It takes a while to mobilize people at a job site."

Plans for the renovation emerged shortly after the building was sold for \$200,000 in June 2003. The buyers, including Mr. Jefferson's partner, John Wolfington, also had to pay \$679,000 in back taxes.

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Nearly seven years later, the building's renovation occurs amid a flurry of housing-related downtown development.

"The reason all this is working is because of the medical school," Mayor Chris Doherty said. "It's been a long process, but this will make Scranton a 24-hour city. This takes us to the next level."

Renters started moving in to a multimillion-dollar, 32-apartment development along Oakford Court to the rear of 317 Linden St. in November. Tenants also live at the Renaissance at 500, a \$28 million Lackawanna Avenue redevelopment that includes 20 housing units. Scranton developer Art Russo recently started converting the upper floors at 326 Spruce St., into nine apartments.

"This is tremendous news for our downtown. It finally gets a much-anticipated project under way," said Austin Burke, president of the Greater Scranton Chamber of Commerce. "Experts have always said the key to comprehensive, long-term economic health for a downtown is when you get people living downtown."

The Connell Building could house up to six retail tenants on the 15,000-square-foot ground floor, Mr. Jefferson said. The apartment mix will include 13 loft-style studio units renting at \$585 monthly; 56 one-bedroom spots renting in the \$700 range and 20 two-bedroom spaces renting for about \$900.

"We've tried to make this as affordable as we possibly could," Mr. Jefferson said.

The apartments will include washers and dryers, carpeting, central heating and air conditioning. Tenants will be responsible for electric, cable and telephone expenses and parking. The Scranton Parking Authority invested \$11 million in the reconstruction of an adjoining 233-space parking lot, which opened Feb. 1.

The project's last hurdle was cleared Monday when Ms. Aebli secured final approval for state grant funding, including \$4.4 million for demolition and environmental abatement, \$1 million in "growing greener" housing redevelopment financing and \$500,000 from a housing and redevelopment assistance program.

The developers secured a short-term \$5.5-million loan, Mr. Jefferson said, and qualify for a \$3 million federal New Markets Tax Credit, which provides incentives for investment and development in low-income communities. The remainder of the project will be financed by the partners, he said.

A recent, \$684,232 judgment against the developers in Lackawanna County Court for unpaid bills related to the cleanup and environmental work at the Connell Building was

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paid Monday to Growing Green Construction Services of Dunmore, Mr. Jefferson and Ms. Aebli said.

Mr. Burke sees an immediate economic boost.

"This will inject millions of dollars in spending into the downtown," he said. "The building trades could certainly use the work."

Mr. Jefferson said the devastating recession, drop-off in commercial development and tight credit failed to doom the development.

"You couldn't have picked a worse economic time to try to put together a project," he said. "I don't know of many projects this large that are moving forward at this time."

Contact the writer: [jhaggerty@timeshamrock.com](mailto:jhaggerty@timeshamrock.com)

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