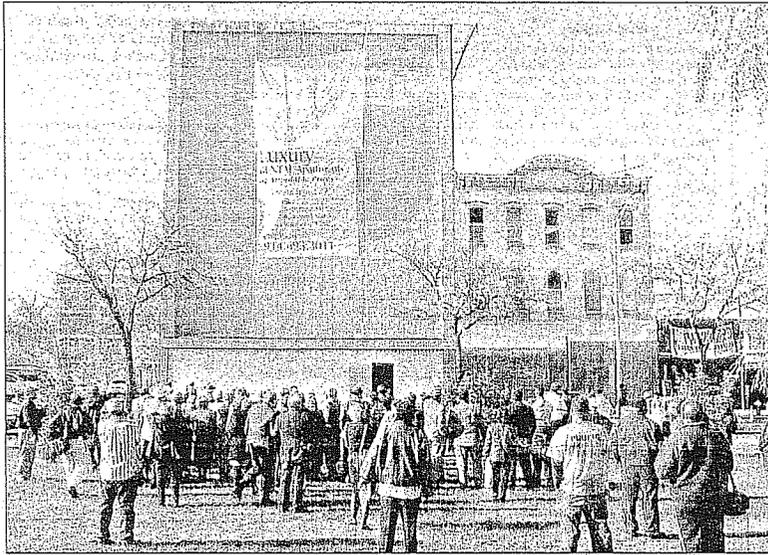


Plainfield unveils Tepper's project



STAFF PHOTOS BY KATHY JOHNSON

Plainfield officials unveil a sign on the old Tepper's department store Tuesday, declaring plans to convert the building into apartments, retail and office space. Construction is expected to begin by the end of November.

City builds future by renovating its past

By RICHARD QUINN
Staff Writer

PLAINFIELD — Construction soon will begin for the \$12 million conversion of the former Tepper's department store, which once stood as a city landmark but in recent years had been seen as a symbol of Plainfield's inability to lure private development.

The store at 122-44 W. Front St. will be turned into Horizons at Plainfield, said Ken Regan of Regan Development Corp., the New York company developing the site. The project includes:

- 75 affordable apartments, priced between \$475 per month for a one-bedroom and \$750 per month for a three-bedroom.

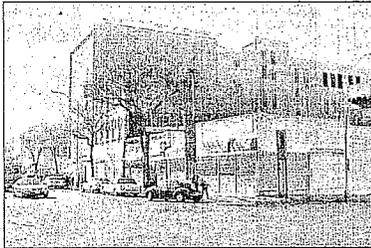
INSIDE: Other plans
Office, business development to begin on long-vacant Park-Madison site.
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- Nearly 30,000 square feet of retail space, 60 percent of which already is leased.

- About 15,000 square feet of office space donated for city offices.

Construction should start by the end of November, Regan said. The retail space should open in early 2003, while the apartments should open that spring.

A throng of city, county and state officials on Tuesday kicked off the project with a news conference on



The former Tepper's department store on West Front Street, which once stood as a city landmark, will be converted into Horizons at Plainfield.

the building's first floor.

"Some developers do not come into urban settings because of a reduced profit," Regan said. "We look at this as a long-term

investment."

For the first half of the 20th century, Plainfield was the shopping and

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Tepper's

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business hub for Central Jersey.

Tepper's was the grandest of the three department stores in the city (including Bamberger's, which later became a Macy's before closing). But in the 1960s the growth of highway shopping centers and then malls changed the face of retailing and sent downtowns into decline. Regional and national chains made it virtually impossible for small independent retailers such as Tepper's to survive.

The elegance had fallen victim to a quarter century of abandonment. Yet the tattered interior of Tepper's on Tuesday was filled with enthusiasm, not despair; with words of promise and success, not of lost dreams or failure.

The building where the crowd gathered to talk about redevelopment was cold from the decades it has stood without electric power or heat.

Behind the weathered plywood facade on West Front Street, shards of broken glass littered the floor of the display windows, where dirty and faded valances still hung overhead.

Inside, paint chips lay scattered at the foot of the columns that support the 20-foot ceilings.

Portable floodlights reflected off the stained ceilings and walls, giving an eerie backdrop to the podium where officials offered their thanks and their hopes.

Shy investors and fizzled proposals led to decades of inactivity at the store, which closed in 1977 after filing for bankruptcy. The building has been vacant since, although several proposals were discussed in the 1980s and '90s.

"It was a good store," said Benjamin Tepper, 91, the last owner of the store his family founded in 1907. "It was a good town for

business. Then it ceased being a good town for business."

Tepper, a Bridgewater resident, did not attend Tuesday's ceremony for health reasons. He declined further comment.

The Regan proposal, unlike others, required no city funding. A state Department of Community Affairs grant for \$1.675 million, \$8 million in tax credits and about \$3 million in bank loans will pay for construction, Regan said.

"I can't tell you how much resistance we've had from the development community because they had seen us as a place that got in its own way," Mayor Al McWilliams said. "With this project, we'll get past that. This will be a major catalyst."

Combined with a \$30 million government and retail center on the Park-Madison site across West Front Street, which also languished for decades, the city is moving in the right direction, said Pat Ballard Fox, Plainfield's economic development director.

"Making this kind of investment on two sites designated as

What you can do

◆ Anyone interested in either the apartments or the retail space at Horizons at Plainfield can call (914) 693-3011.

redevelopment areas for more than 20 years is a critical step for Plainfield," Ballard Fox said. "It shows we're starting to get the job done."

Progress brings mixed emotions for city residents who remember Tepper's in its heyday, when people would stop by on a lunch break just to see the clothing on the second floor or shop late on Thursday nights.

Charles A. Jones Jr., 78, still has a Hickey-Freeman suit he bought 53 years ago. The navy blue suit

kept so well, Jones' son borrowed it three years ago to wear to his father's 50th wedding anniversary.

"They had high-class stuff," Jones said.

Jean Matson, 74, worked at Tepper's during her senior year at Plainfield High School. She still remembers the day when a customer ran in and told everyone that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan.

Normally, things were a little less interesting at the notions counter, which sold accessories like buttons and lace.

"The store had an aura about it," Matson said. "You could walk in there and feel good. It felt like luxury."

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