

Developer offers hope for crumbling historic building

Retail and housing in the works for Bridgeport site

By JOEL C. THOMPSON
jthompson@ctpost.com

BRIDGEPORT — A vacant commercial/residential building on lower East Main Street stands in a state of ruin, reflecting the toll of a falling roof, fire damage and the ravages of time and weather.

Portions of the historic structure's interior have collapsed. Bittersweet vines grow up its rear walls. Much of it is boarded up.

But a development firm is determined within a year to restore the landmark Victorian Italiante structure at 588-612 E. Main St., which dates to the 1870s. The firm plans to create four stores on the building's street level and 20 new apartments on its three upper floors.

"This project, when complete, will change the face of the neighborhood," said Jason Epstein, a principal in E/N Properties, as he recently surveyed work gutting the interior in preparation for its reconstruction.

E/N, in association with Regan Development, put together financing for the \$5.2 million project, known as East Main Mews.

Epstein said his firm purchased half of the six-section structure from Michael Freddino, who once operated the Buy-Rite Supermarket in part of the building, and the other half from the city, which had acquired it through tax foreclosure.

Regan Development helped put together the historic tax-credit package, which will help reduce the project's cost, Epstein said.

Other aspects of the financing include loans from the Bank of America and the Connecticut Housing Finance Authority, Home Funds and low-income housing tax credits. A city payment in lieu of



taxes (PILOT) plan will also initially lower the annual tax bill on the property from about \$30,000 to \$7,000 a year.

Robert Halstead, a city planner, said he helped put together the project, about a year-and-a-half ago while he served as city property disposition manager.

The challenge, he said, was to bring together the city and Freddino pieces of the structure under one ownership and to assemble the land behind it for a 32-space parking lot.

Citing the fancy brickwork of its façade, Halstead said he worked about 25 years on developing a plan to save and restore the building.

Ken Regan said the project from his firm's perspective involves restoring a landmark, while providing affordable housing and neighborhood stores. It will add significantly to ongoing efforts to restore the streetscape, he said.

Regan said he was unsure when the structure was built, but added it was definitely constructed in the 1870s. He referred to the ornate façade on the upper three stories, typical of that period.

He said the façade will be repaired, and an effort is under

way to re-create the historic exterior of the street-level commercial space.

"It is a historically significant structure, but it might have fallen down in a year or two if we hadn't got to work on it," Regan said.

He said the roof is gone on at least three or the six sections of the building, and the roof and floors of one of the sections have all collapsed, leaving just the walls.

Edward Lavernoch, the city's deputy economic development director, said the project is significant from the housing perspective because its apartments will be considered affordable under low-income guidelines for city residents.

Plans call for six one-bedroom, six two-bedroom and eight three-bedroom units. Rents will range from \$257 to \$700 monthly for the one-bedroom; from \$742 to \$875 per month for the two-bedroom; and from \$1,054 to \$1,081 for the three-bedroom units, depending on tenant incomes.

Epstein said he and his partner, Victor Naar, plan to find four stores to occupy the commercial space, which will be geared to serving neighbor-

hood needs. The stores will not include a liquor store, a pawnshop or other less desirable uses, Epstein said.

Over its history, the building hosted a variety of neighborhood stores and businesses, including a grocer, a plumber, a furniture store, a restaurant, an upholstery shop and a liquor store.

The East Main Mews project, Epstein said, will add his firm's effort to uplift East Main Street through the rehabilitation of several residential and commercial buildings nearby in the Nichols and Cedar street area.

E/N Properties has also renovated a number of residential properties on the East Side, including a four-family house on Noble Avenue, a 12-family house on Kossuth Street, two brick buildings at Pembroke and Arctic streets, and a 15-apartment building at Stillman and Hallett streets.

In the downtown, the firm is converting the five-story Professional Building at 881 Lafayette Boulevard into 38 residential condominium units.

For more information about the East Main Mews project, contact the developers: (914) 693-3011.

A demolition crew removes trash along the back side of 588-612 E. Main St. in Bridgeport on Tuesday. Plans are to save the dilapidated structure and create housing and retail space.

