

Plan calls for converting former KCK City Hall into lofts

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Mark Wiebe, *The Kansas City Star*

More loft apartments are slated for downtown. Only this time they're planned for downtown Kansas City, Kansas.

And they're not planned for just any old building – but for the historic former City Hall at Sixth and Ann Avenue.

Though still peppered with vacant storefronts and blighted homes, the city's downtown has experienced modest housing growth in recent years.

That growth, however, has yet to yield the kind of urbane, spacious, high-ceilinged apartments available in downtown Kansas City. Call them lofts, flats, whatever. The fact is, City Vision Ministries, a nonprofit community development corporation, wants to bring them to Wyandotte County.

For the past year, the Kansas City, Kan., organization has been laying the financial foundation for converting the 92 year-old City Hall into a 40-unit loft apartment building.

Last month the \$5.5 million project received a boost when the Kansas Department of Commerce and Housing approved housing tax credits that will generate \$2.2 million in equity. That approval came nearly a year after City Vision got tentative approval for \$1.9 million in historic preservation tax credits. Construction could begin as early as this fall.

City Vision will receive construction financing from Bank of America.

The 40 units will represent a small fraction of the thousands of dwellings – lofts or otherwise – that have been erected in downtown Kansas City, Mo., in the past decade. But they are at least a start for Kansas City, Kan., said John Harvey, City Vision's president and executive director.

Referring to the loft apartments that have helped revitalize Kansas City's River Market area, Harvey said, "Who would have thought they were going to develop half-million dollar units in what used to be Mafia central?"

That experience, he said, demonstrates that people's perceptions of an area can change quickly "when you show people a very unique product at a very competitive price."

The product he's talking about – the building his organization plans to renovate – served as City Hall from 1911 to 1972. The four-story building has sat vacant and has been under municipal ownership ever since. City Vision plans to exercise its option to purchase the building for \$10 from Wyandotte County's Unified Government.

Plans call for converting office and meeting spaces into units that range from 600 to 1,500 square feet, including an artist's studio in the old men's jail and two penthouse units in what used to be the women's jail. The old police garage next door will provide residents with covered parking.

Many of the apartments will preserve elements that give the building character, such as ceilings as high as 18 feet in places and old, walk-in safes in 15 of the units. Each unit will have a kitchen and a bathroom, but otherwise will essentially be one large room.

"It's classic New York-style lofts," Harvey said. "It's very flexible space. Wide open. Big windows."

Harvey projects that monthly leases will range from \$450 to \$1,000, slightly lower than in the downtown Kansas City market, where it's difficult to find apartments for under \$550 a month.

Because the building is receiving historic preservation tax credits, its common spaces must be restored to their original condition. That requirement does not apply to the original lofts. It does apply to the spacious old City Council chambers, which Harvey plans to convert into commercial space.

Structurally, Harvey said, the building is sound. Most of the renovation will focus on replacing the roof, installing new mechanical systems and preserving the building's original interior designs, from the lobby's terrazzo floor to plaster crown molding and marble wainscot.

Harvey is confident that a market exists for lofts in Kansas City, Kan. He is counting, in part, on at least some of downtown's 12,000 workers wanting to live within walking distance of work.

George Birt, a loft developer who has been involved in four historic warehouse conversions in Kansas City, also thinks the time is right for more downtown housing in Kansas City, Kan.

He has been impressed with City Vision's other downtown projects, which include a 58-unit town house development that opened last year in the 600 block of Nebraska and is now completely leased.

Last year the organization purchased a downtown building at Eighth Street and Armstrong Avenue that houses the Kansas City Kansan with plans for converting it into 21 loft units. That \$3.3 million project will move forward as soon as financing is in place and the Kansan finds a new home, Harvey said.

Other nonprofit developers have also contributed to downtown housing. Catholic Housing of Wyandotte County, for example, has renovated or constructed more than 30 homes and has 31 other projects under way.

With these and other projects already drawing new residents to downtown, Birt said, the City Hall lofts should be able to attract tenants.

“I would really love to see it because I really think that community is starting to come together,” he said. “The bottom line is it’s only a matter of time before more people embrace these opportunities in downtown Kansas City, Kansas.”