



Local developer is ready to invest in center city Harrisburg

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CHARLES THOMPSON, The Patriot-News

City debt levels may not be the only thing growing in Harrisburg, after all.

Local developers WCI Partners are scheduled today to unveil sketch plans for a five-story office building at Second and State streets that is the first downtown construction proposal to hit the planning boards in the post-recession era.

The building is targeted for the vacant southeast corner of the intersection and will feature room for a restaurant and retail space on street level, WCI managing partner J. Alex Hartzler said Tuesday.

"It's significant because there's nothing bright coming out about the city in the same volume as what's coming out that's negative," said Bill Gladstone of the Bill Gladstone Group of NAI CIR. "I think this is a real positive step for the city, and for development in general here."

Hartzler said he has no qualms about investing in a city that is making national news for its precarious municipal finances.

"I look at much longer trends," he said. "When you build a building of this nature, it's going to last decades, if not centuries. And the long-term trends for the city remain very positive from my point of view."

The 2008-09 recession killed Hartzler's prior plan for this site — a 13-story hotel.

WCI wants to get the office-building project approved in time to qualify for a city tax abatement benefit that is scheduled to expire at the end of the year.

Hartzler said he believes the "more modest" plan is a good compromise that avoids objections expressed by some neighbors about a tower some said would have dramatically changed sight lines between the Susquehanna River and the Capitol.

Opponents of the hotel project, who received a special briefing on the project last week, agreed.

"We were very pleased with the proposed plans, in lieu of what was previously proposed," said John Campbell, executive director of Historic Harrisburg Association. "This seems to match the architectural character of the State Street and Capitol Area neighborhoods, and it will not ruin the skyline as the previous plan would have."

WCI hopes to break ground on the building early in 2011, with occupancy slated for the summer or fall of 2012. Parking for the building will be provided in the nearby Spring Street garage, Hartzler said.

Sketch plans for the project are to be presented to the Harrisburg Planning Commission at 6:30 tonight.

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