

SANDUSKY CITY HALL PROJECT - SNEAK PEEK

Work on new City Hall continues

By ANDY OURIEL, Sandusky Register 1-19-2019



Register photo/ERIN CALDWELL

Among the components inside the \$11.5 million Columbus Avenue Revitalization initiative in downtown Sandusky include Vita Urbana, an upscale public market and wine bar. When it opens this spring, customers can purchase food, nonperishable items from local farms, alcoholic beverages and more from there.



Register photos/ERIN CALDWELL



Construction workers on Wednesday build out a street-level storefront, one of several components making up the \$11.5 million Columbus Avenue Revitalization initiative in downtown Sandusky. The initiative involves repurposing three empty buildings, which will eventually house a new City Hall, public market and wine bar, 18 apartments and spaces for future commercial tenants in storefronts.

SANDUSKY

By spring, a person could — without stepping outside — wake up in a downtown Sandusky apartment, stroll downstairs, attend a city commission meeting and head next door to consume a toasted panini paired with a glass of wine.

The multifaceted and transcendent Columbus Avenue Revitalization initiative, according to developers, creates a new beautiful building benchmark stemming from an unprecedented public-private partnership. “This project will set the standard for all new development in Sandusky’s central downtown, establishing a high standard that promotes variety, viability, sustainability and connectivity,” said Mike Marous, the director of development for Sand City. Sand City is the project developer and owner of these properties. Earlier this week, Marous invited the Register for a tour through each building. He also provided some updates on the project.

Inside occupants

Breaking ground in fall 2017, construction work circles back to repurposing three longtime vacant structures — the Whitworth, Kingsbury and Commercial Banking and Trust buildings — wrapping around Columbus Avenue and East Washington Row. The Columbus Avenue Revitalization initiative, which totals 51,000 square feet, consists of four major components:

- City Hall, where administrative offices — think planners, lawyers, engineers, utility bill collectors and more — will relocate from Meigs Street; It’s also where commissioners will host public meetings.
- Columbus Avenue Lofts, a high-end apartment complex offering 18 units, each differing in size but all boasting scenic views of downtown
- Vita Urbana, an upscale public market and wine bar; Customers can purchase coffee, to-go food items, like sandwiches, nonperishable goods from local farms and frequent a bar area serving numerous delicacies, wine and other alcoholic beverages.
- Storefront spaces for two tenants

Keeping tabs on construction

Officials pegged the construction project at about two-thirds complete. Hesitant to provide a specific date, they felt confident about most components — City Hall, the market and the apartments — simultaneously opening sometime this spring. Tenants in the two storefronts would soon follow.

Among the major construction tasks completed: framing City Hall and the apartments; preparing various lines, such as electrical conduits, for connections; installing new elevators; replacing windows; and installing drywall. Among the major construction tasks left incomplete: building out exterior retail storefront space; completing finishes in both City Hall and the apartments; and negotiating leases with residential and commercial tenants.

Saving the structures

The \$11.5 million project received about \$3 million in federal and state tax credits because, in an application, officials vowed to salvage all three structures, each at least 100 years old.

Once a commercial paradise — housing companies such as the Western Security Bank, the Manhattan Clothing Co. and Crosby Shoes in the early 1900s — up until recently, it represented one of Sandusky’s biggest blighted areas. For many years, even decades, these buildings sat empty on a prominent city block. But, with work well underway and soon finishing, this area will become prominent once more, reinvigorating life into these storied structures, not to mention throughout downtown, said Matt Lasko, the city’s chief development officer. “These historic buildings are of major importance for us to maintain the fabric of our downtown,” Lasko said.

Marous piggybacked off Lasko’s comments. “Sand City LLC and Marous Brothers Construction (which owns Sand City) have worked closely with the Ohio Historic Preservation Office throughout the project’s rehabilitation and will continue to do so,” Marous said.

The tax credits stipulate workers must retain or maintain as many historic elements in these buildings as possible. At times, it complicated matters, most notably pushing back its originally intended opening date of Dec. 31, 2018. “We recognize that each building is unique in

its own right, both on the exterior and interior,” Marous said. “Through the design, and now during construction, we have been mindful to preserve and/or reinstate character-defining finishes and features that celebrate the original architecture. While unforeseen conditions have caused us to temporarily delay or adjust scopes of work, we are absolutely committed to historic preservation and will not allow challenges to affect the final historic or historically compatible finishes.”

What’ll become of the current City Hall?

When administrative employees relocate from the existing City Hall site, on Meigs Street, they’ll leave behind their police and municipal court colleagues.

In August 2018, city commissioners voted to eventually relocate police and court operations on Hayes Avenue (Ohio 4) where the former American Crayon factory once stood. Those moves should occur by 2022.

A year’s worth of planning culminated in officials realizing the Meigs Street property presents many challenges for renovations. Upgrading these shortcomings, including accessibility and security, would be costly and most likely lead to an inferior product. An ongoing study aims to determine the best possible uses for the waterfront location.

