



Anticipation Builds For Future

During a recent groundbreaking ceremony for Franklin Street City Lofts, the small lot was a gathering place for something new in the north end of downtown.

People were meeting their neighbors and exchanging encouraging words about an area that had fallen into neglect for almost 30 years.

North Franklin, with its winding brick street and shaded areas, is re-emerging as a cozy neighborhood.

City Lofts, four town homes priced from \$899,000 to \$1 million at 1920 N. Franklin St., represents one layer of how varied the street is becoming.

City Lofts, which is being developed by Jay Mize and Dan Sefair, will be surrounded by other projects. The Arlington, a former hotel at 1209-1227 N. Franklin St., will soon open 21 units, a mix of offices and condominiums.

Next door to City Lofts, developers Joshua Fernandes, Matthew Mosk and Alex Gomez plan 18 condos along with offices in a four-story building at Franklin and Fortune streets.

"With land prices climbing to \$200 a square foot, this is probably the last area of downtown where you won't see all high-rises," Mosk said.

The structure will fit into a pedestrian-friendly streetscape, Mosk said, and unit sizes will vary.

"People like to live in all different spaces," Mayor Pam Iorio said at the City Lofts groundbreaking Monday.

She noted North Franklin has a mid-rise development, the seven-story, 40-unit Residences of Franklin Street, soon to open at 1108-1124 N. Franklin St.

In the planning stages is The Royal, a 27-story, 182-condo project at Franklin and Harrison streets.

"This mix of residential and business [building] heights is hard to achieve in the downtown core," said Iorio, who views the developers in the north end of downtown as pioneers and has made redeveloping Franklin Street a priority.

"This is the beginning of a real neighborhood," she said.

City Councilwoman Linda Saul-Sena called Sefair and Mize "gutsy" for investing in an area formerly known for vacant buildings and homeless people.

"This isn't the Trump Tower, but it's a classy project," said Jonathan Moore, of Rojo Architecture LLC, who helped design City Lofts.

Moore said the city has asked him to work on a plan for the area's Massey Park, closed last year after homeless advocates were arrested for distributing food there.

"Massey Park needs to be there for families and people walking dogs," he said.

All the change along North Franklin is what attracted Interarch Design Inc. The 20-year-old design company will move from Madison Street and Ashley Drive to The Arlington within a month.

"At first, we didn't think the space would fit our needs," said designer Dave Fraser. "But then we bought two of the downstairs units and combined them for 3,000 square feet."

The nine employees will be removed from the hustle and bustle of the downtown core. But Fraser said everyone is looking forward to being part of a newly developed section, where it will be easier to get to know neighbors.

"It's still very convenient to everything," he said.

Renovations are ongoing at The Arlington, built in the 1910s, and Fly Bar & Restaurant, 1202 N. Franklin St.

Working on the interior of a corner unit at The Arlington, carpenter Richard Kent said the new tenants, a law firm, want a classy space in keeping with the wrought-iron balcony look of the restored building. He said there will be stained concrete floors and column wrapping.

"It will be very high-end yet still comfortable," he said as he glued pieces of wood.

"This whole building has been a labor of love," said Scott Floyd, a construction manager on The Arlington renovation.

Floyd said his great-grandfather owned a drugstore in the former Arlington Hotel in the 1930s. After the hotel closed, the building eventually became a Badcock Furniture store from the 1950s until recently.

"He'd sell popcorn and sodas when the Gasparilla parade came by here," Floyd said. "That was when this area was really a part of a busy downtown."

Matt Budesá, the Fly's general manager, said getting crowds back is the goal. The bar and restaurant, set to open in mid-July, will stay open late and feature live music.

"We need new life and some energy," he said.

by: Janis Froelich