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TRIBUNE PHOTO: JIM CLARK

Dudley Weaver, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, stands in front of the former church-owned Danmoore Hotel, which is making way for an underground parking garage and courtyard.

Razings, raisings alter Portland skyline

Construction projects reshape several downtown blocks Razings, raisings alter

Portland skyline

By JON BELL Issue date: Tue, May 3, 2005

The Tribune

For the first time in nearly a century, natural light is passing through one of the original stained glass windows at the First Presbyterian Church on Southwest Alder Street in downtown Portland.

Since the early 1900s, the abutting Danmoore Hotel had blocked the window, and the entire south side of the 1890-built sanctuary, from view.

But in just a few short days at the end of April, Hoffman Construction Co. reduced the old hotel to a pile of rubble, clearing the way for a parking garage and a street-level courtyard. It's just one of a handful of projects changing the face of a few downtown blocks these days.

"It's rather exciting to see the sanctuary exposed for the first time in almost 100 years," said the Rev. Dudley Weaver, whose church owned the Danmoore. "It's been a long time."

The roughly \$8 million project, funded through a member-driven, \$5.8 million capital campaign and a loan, will result in a three-level underground parking garage next to the church at the corner of Southwest Morrison Street and 12th Avenue. Atop the garage, which the church will use on weekends and open to the public during the week, will be a fenced-in park and plaza.

Until the Danmoore's recent razing, the nonprofit Central City Concern had leased the building from the church for \$1 a year and used it as transitional housing. The agency was able to move its operations elsewhere with the church's help.

While the new park will be used primarily for church activities, it will occasionally be opened for public events. In addition, several public benches will be installed around the perimeter of the plaza, outside the fence.

Weaver said the park, along with the newly exposed church windows, will add "a spot of beauty" to downtown.

Just across Alder Street, the architecture firm Skylab Design Group — of Doug Fir lounge fame — is remodeling a former men's bathhouse into a 5,000-square-foot showroom for the Intelligent Design furniture company. Wrapped in glass and metal, the building's exterior will be a stark juxtaposition against the Gothic heaviness of the church across the street.

But it is a project a few blocks away, at 635 S.W. 19th Ave., that may result in the most radical alteration of a downtown block.

“It’ll transform the neighborhood,” said Mark Edlen, whose Gerding/Edlen Development Co. will tear down the old Civic Apartments and build an underground parking garage, 40,000 square feet of retail space and 400 housing units. The housing will rise from atop the retail space; on the eastern half will be 15 stories of 261 condominiums and on the western, five stories of 140 apartments.

Looking for first-timers

Tom Cody, a principal with Gerding/Edlen, said the condos, priced mostly between \$200,000 and \$300,000, will be aimed at first-time homebuyers.

“So it’s a significant price point below a lot of the stuff you see in the Pearl today,” he said, adding that some units will have views into nearby PGE Park.

The affordable housing side is a project for the Housing Authority of Portland, which bought the Civic building in 1997.

“Our piece is to ensure that working people and very low-income people have the opportunity to stay in the downtown core,” said Steve Rudman, HAP’s executive director.

The total cost for the project is about \$90 million. Funding will come from a variety of sources, including a loan, federal New Market Tax Credits and a handful of equity partners, Cody said.

Wages become issue

Though Gerding/Edlen has begun asbestos abatement and is scheduled to start demolition within 45 days, the project has run into a bit of a snag in the form of prevailing wages. At issue is whether HAP needs to pay construction workers commercial prevailing wages or residential prevailing wages, figures that are based on the number of stories and the type of construction used on a project.

HAP is arguing with the state Bureau of Labor and Industries that its five-story, wood-frame component of the project qualifies for residential wages — which in this case would be about \$500,000 less than commercial wages.

Rudman said the prevailing wage issue is “throwing a monkey wrench” into the process, but HAP’s deputy executive director, Margaret Van Vliet, said that “we haven’t stopped working on trying to get the deal closed.”

Cody of Gerding/Edlen said he’s confident the issue will be resolved and the project will go forward, with a tentative completion date of mid-2007.

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