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Will grand old courthouse become a plush pad?: [LATE TAMPA Edition]

DAVID KARP. **St. Petersburg Times**. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Jul 26, 2003. pg. 1.B

On these steps, drama used to unfold.

Drug lords, thieves, corrupt politicians and their lawyers would march up the grand stairway of the U.S. Federal Courthouse and pause for an impromptu news conference beneath the words "United States of America" etched in stone.

But now the copper lampposts at the courthouse doors could become the entrance to somebody's home.

If Mayor Pam Iorio has her way, the old federal courthouse could be converted into a residential living space with offices or shops.

The federal government this week decided to give the city the keys to the courthouse, which has been unoccupied since the new courthouse opened five years ago.

The city gets the courthouse, a Renaissance revival structure that opened in 1904 as a post office and customs house, for free. It can convert it into a residential complex, a museum, a government office center or a hotel.

"I want the very best ideas," Iorio said Friday. "We want that north area of downtown to be a neighborhood. The federal courthouse can help us attain that goal."

Two groups have submitted proposals to renovate the courthouse, which was put on the national register of historic places in 1974.

Developer Russell Versaggi and architect Stephanie Ferrell want to make an ornate courtroom into a banquet center, where groups could hold wedding receptions, luncheons and galas.

Other space might be used for an athletic club or art studios. On the top three floors - where the grand jury used to meet - would be 45 loft-style apartments. In the basement would be a parking garage with as many as 49 spaces.

The second developer, Gaspar Properties Inc., wants to convert the courthouse into a top-flight, Class A office building. Developer Hamilton Jones said he also plans to put apartments on the top floors.

"There's tremendous potential to restore the glory of that building," Versaggi said.

Iorio hasn't yet decided what the city will do. She wants a project that will spur

residential development and promote the arts.

The courthouse on N Florida Avenue sits blocks from the proposed new Tampa Museum of Art and the city's planned cultural arts district.

City officials say people are ready to live downtown, where they can walk to work or stroll to the new arts museum. "I can taste those folks out there," said city housing chief Bob Harrell, who has overseen the project so far.

Versaggi and Ferrell plan to convert the courthouse's marble lobby and central courtroom into a banquet center operated by Munro & Wilder, a special events firm that operates the Mirror Lake Lyceum in St. Petersburg.

Versaggi and Ferrell would give the city 50 percent of net proceeds from the banquet center and other retail stores. They estimate taxpayers would get \$62,500 annually for the first five years, and as much as \$100,000 a year after that.

They want the city to give them street parking and want help to get a tax re-assessment. They plan to get a loan to finance the \$6.3- million project.

Ferrell, a well-regarded architect and preservationist, is a business partner with Harrell, the city housing chief who has overseen the courthouse acquisition so far. Harrell's department also oversees historic preservation projects.

Ferrell's proposal also includes a letter of support from the Tampa Downtown Partnership, whose chairman, Hal Flowers, has worked as a real estate broker for Harrell.

Harrell has publicly disclosed the business ties before, and has said he would avoid any conflicts.

The second developer, Gaspar Properties, promised to pay the city \$250,000 a year. Company president Hamilton Jones said he would pay \$5-million in cash to restore the courthouse, which the city would still own.

Jones's written proposal calls only for office space, but he said he also would build apartments because the downtown market won't support a new office building alone.

[Illustration]

Caption: (2000) The old federal courthouse, located at N Florida Avenue in downtown Tampa; Photo: PHOTO, FRASER HALE