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Crafting an Exchange artwork

Church pursues conversion into apartments

By: Murray McNeill

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Graham Reddoch, chairman of the board for the Exchange Community Church, which owns the building at 75 Albert St. The group wants to turn 22 studios into studio apartments.

A local church group hopes to go where few other downtown developers have gone by converting an old Exchange District building into studio apartments that even low-income artists could afford.

The Exchange Community Church wants to convert up to 22 artist's studios on the top three floors of the

five-storey Silvester-Willson Building into studio apartments.

The church's board chairman, Graham Reddoch, said there's a need for more affordable rental units in The Exchange and the church would like to address that need with the Albert Street building it acquired 18 months ago.

But the multimillion-dollar question is whether it can do the upgrades required to convert the working space to living space and still keep rents low enough for the low-income artists in the area.

"We're concerned the cost of the renovation will make it unaffordable for the community members who currently use the space," Reddoch said in an interview in the church's second-community centre. "We're just looking for how we can do this and keep the costs down and still meet all of the (fire and safety) code requirements."

He said at the very least, the church would need to upgrade the building's electrical and plumbing systems. And it would also have to find a way to add a second stairwell, which would be no easy feat.

Church officials are also worried that once they start making changes to the building, the city will require them to make a bunch more, which could greatly inflate the cost of redevelopment.

In a bid to address some of those concerns, the church is bringing in an outside agency -- SEED Winnipeg -- to conduct a feasibility study this summer and help develop a business plan for the project. That should give the church a better idea of whether the project is doable.

Reddoch said Cibinel Architects Ltd., which designed Red River College's Princess Street campus, did a preliminary building-code analysis of the building last year and came up with a rough cost estimate of about \$2 million.

"They could easily spend more if they wanted to," owner George Cibinel said. "But it's definitely doable and it really should be done, too, because it's just so important to get mixed occupants into our buildings and to get more residential units in the downtown."

The church's proposal also has the support of the Exchange District Business Improvement Zone and Heritage Winnipeg, which both want to see more affordable housing and redevelopment projects in The Exchange.

"Personally, I'm in love with that building and all of the folks who are in there," Exchange District Biz executive director Mal Anderson said. "That's part of the fabric that's here -- the artists."

"I think they would be filling a niche that needs to be filled," Heritage Winnipeg executive director Cindy Tugwell said. "I personally think the more diversified you make (a building), the better."

Reddoch said the church has been surveying area artists and community groups to see what they'd like to see done with the building. He said some of the 35 artists leasing space in the building are opposed to the redevelopment because they're worried it will drive rents too high.

They pay \$12 a square foot for studio space in the building. So a 100-square-foot room costs about \$1,200 a year, or \$100 a month, and a 500-square-foot one about \$6,000 a year, or \$500 a month.

Musician Patrick Lussier is one of the artist who is worried about what would happen to rental rates if the project proceeds.

Lussier said he loves having a studio in The Exchange, but he can't afford to pay a lot of rent. He doesn't want to live and work in the same building.

"So I'm OK with the way it is now."

Reddoch said if the church proceeds with the upgrades, it hopes the residential portion of the project will qualify for funding under the joint city/provincial Tax Increment Financing program.

Two local agencies -- The Winnipeg Foundation and Community Places -- have said they would provide funding for upgrading the community-use space on the second floor.

"It's not just a question of where we could get the most money, but what's the highest and best use for this building," Reddoch said. "And our sense is... a balance of community use and residential."

Know of any interesting trends or developments in the local office, retail, or industrial real estate sectors?
Let

Murray McNeill know at the e-mail

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Fine pedigree

Here are some facts and a little history about the Silvester-Willson Building:

Location: Southeast corner of Albert Street and McDermot Avenue

Size: Five storeys, 22,000 square feet

Age: Built in 1904

Original cost of construction: \$40,000

Architect: J.H.G. Russell, who also was a tenant from 1906 to 1909

Named after: A. Silvester, a hardware and lumber merchant from Elkhorn, Man., and H. Lee Willson of Willson Stationary Company, a longtime owner/occupant

Previous uses: Warehouse, office and retail space

Current use: Retail on the main floor, church/community space on the second floor, artist's studios on the top three floors

Owner: Exchange Community Church

Proposed plans: Upgrade the electrical and plumbing systems, add second stairway and convert up to 22 of the studios to studio/apartments

Cost: Initial estimate was about \$2 million, although a pending feasibility study should come up with a more definitive number

Key challenge: Redevelop the building but keep rents affordable for low-income artists

-- Sources: Exchange Community Church and Heritage Winnipeg

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