



\$2.1 million grant to help revitalize downtown

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UTICA — A \$2.1 million state grant for improvements and renovations at three Genesee Street buildings could be the beginning of “a new era in downtown,” Utica Mayor David Roefaro said Thursday.

Roefaro and Empire State Development Chairman Dennis Mullen announced the Restore New York Communities Initiative grant award during a well-attended 3 p.m. news conference at the corner of Genesee and Lafayette streets – within sight of two of the businesses that will benefit from it.

“This is a block that used to be the busy corner, and we’re going to make it the busy corner again,” Roefaro said.

The \$2.1 million award, part of a total of \$12 million now earmarked for projects in the Mohawk Valley, will be used to expand offices, create loft-style apartments, and otherwise rehabilitate the buildings at 170-172, 180 and 230 Genesee St., Roefaro said.

The state funds set aside for other regional projects include a \$1.69 million award for rehabilitating buildings in the city of Rome’s Brownfield Opportunity Area, a news release said.

Utica received a similar grant last year for renovations at the Stanley Center for the Arts, and Roefaro said the newest award is another example of the focus on downtown revitalization that he’s pushed for since taking office.

“As goes downtown, so goes our entire region,” he said.

The Projects

Mullen said the Restore New York Initiative represented “a collaborative effort of communities working together” with developers and government officials to create change and economic growth throughout the state.

The City of Utica is the official grant recipient, but the money is earmarked for the specific projects outlined in the city’s grant application and Roefaro said the property owners will be responsible for funding the projects themselves until the grant money is paid out.

About 90 percent of grant-funded projects are compensated “post-completion,” meaning the property owners only are reimbursed after the projects are finished, Mullen said. In some cases, however, a percentage of the funds is made available at the half-way point.

Urban and Economic Development Commissioner Robert Sullivan said there is no timeline for completion at this time, but work must begin within either 120 or 190 days.

All three buildings chosen for the Utica grant are currently more than 50 percent vacant, and at least one – the Winston Building – was described by local officials as “a historic and architecturally significant” landmark. The planned improvements include:

Black River Systems: Black River Systems, currently located at 162 Genesee St., plans to expand into the adjacent building at 170-172 Genesee St. to allow for future growth. The advanced engineering company currently employs about 50 people, but has reached maximum capacity at its existing office, Vice President Milissa Benincasa said.

The company has been growing steadily for 12 years and still is “in hiring mode,” she said, so there’s a good chance that more jobs will be created once the new space is available.

Benincasa also said she’d like to see a central elevator installed between the two buildings to provide some continuity in the offices.

Pizza Classic; Tom Torchia, owner of Pizza Classic and the building at 180 Genesee St. said he also plans to expand into an adjacent building, and create more dining space and a larger kitchen for his restaurant and catering business.

City officials have suggested that he convert an upper floor to residential space, but he said he’d like to renovate it and then continue renting it as practice space for local musicians.

“It’s nice to see that between the Mayor’s Office and (Robert) Sullivan they’re saying ‘You made a commitment to stay down here all these years; we’re going to make a commitment to help you,’” he said.

The Winston Building: Located at 230 Genesee St., this building currently is home to Podosek Accounting Services, and a prime spot for monitoring the Peregrine falcons that live across the street at the M&T Bank.

Owner Craig Podosek said his family business has been located in the building for more than 50 years, and that he's looking forward to restoring it and creating both office space and new apartments.

"The building will come back," Podosek said. "It's a great building and I'll make it proud for the whole city of Utica."

Reaction

Karen Boucher, who owns 174-176 Genesee Street said her building also received Restore New York grant funding last year to convert their third floor into loft apartments, and said it was great to see others in the neighborhood benefitting from the program as well.

"I'm happy for them," she said. "We got our share and there will be more to come."

Mullen said the grant program is highly competitive. More than 300 applications were submitted for this round of funding, and only 79 projects were selected. Or put another way, only about half of the \$300 million in funding requested was actually awarded.







"You should be very proud as a community of your leadership here and the work that was done to bring this to fruition," he told those who attended the announcement.

Sullivan said the process of applying for grants has been frustrating at times, especially when nearby cities such as Syracuse seemed to receive so many. He was thrilled to learn of the current grant award earlier this week, and that it "really validates our efforts."





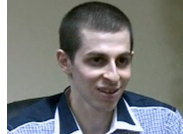

"We've got a lot of projects on the drawing boards (and) we're working with a lot of property owners," he said. "We're looking at a real turn around for downtown."

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