



Utica block once in danger of demolition now coming to life

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UTICA — All four of the projects on a Bleeker Street block once slated for demolition are expected to be finished by early- to mid-2011, the owners of the properties say.

Already, a karate studio is up, running and gaining popularity, according to one of its instructors. It will soon be joined by a mix of night clubs, office space and apartments.

And city officials say the development will have effects beyond the buildings being renovated.

“There’s no doubt in my mind there will be spin-off of that,” Mayor David Roefaro said. “That’s just the first step.”

In addition to the karate studio at 249 Bleeker St., which is owned by Sulejman Latic, the projects include:

* **237-239 Bleeker St.:** Wade McCrite is turning the downstairs floor into retail space where refurbished furniture will be sold, probably by January 2011. Upstairs, he plans to have a martini bar with appetizers that could be ready by mid- 2011.

* **243-245 Bleeker St.:** George Heath is renovating the former Millenium Nightclub into a high-end bar called Strut, with a lounge and dancing. Construction will be finished in a month but it will take longer to obtain a liquor license, and Heath is hoping to open by October.

“We’ll hopefully bring to this area what most people have to go to Syracuse or Albany for,” he said.

Heath, who redeveloped a historic house on Park Avenue with McCrite, is also turning the upper level into an apartment.

* **251-255 Bleeker St.:** David Bonacci purchased the building and is currently renovating it as the Utica headquarters for his business, Bonacci Architects, and possibly another commercial tenant.

The second floor will be a residential space for Bonacci, who is chairman of the city’s Scenic and Historic Preservation Commission and a Landmark Society board member, and his wife. Both projects should be ready by the end of the year.

“We had a vision to move downtown; be part of a renaissance of that area and develop an unusual loft space,” Bonacci said. “The transformation of that block is going to be almost remarkable.”

And between Heath and Bonacci’s buildings is the one owned by Sulejman Latic, a Bosnian martial arts instructor. The section facing Bleeker is a martial arts retail store and café, while the back has been converted into a training studio.

Latic could not be reached, but an assistant instructor said the studio is “doing very well.”

“He’s got a lot of new students,” said Gary Webb, adding that the location is ideal for inner-city youth. “He wants to be where it’s easiest for them to get to.”

The buildings were initially slated for demolition under former Mayor Timothy Julian, and the Urban Renewal Agency purchased the buildings for a total of \$217,800. The goal was to create surface parking.

But Roefaro’s administration instead focused on marketing them and eventually found buyers – they were purchased by their various owners for between \$1,500 and \$5,000.

And more construction is coming soon down the street in the form of the long-awaited parking garage.

Roefaro also is lobbying the state for a Main Street grant to fix up the dilapidated sidewalks and generally spruce up the street.

City Community Revitalization Director Robert Sullivan said the project must be viewed in the context of others, including the three Genesee Street buildings that will benefit from millions in Restore New York grants.

“I think it’s going to look like the kind of vibrant, urban landscape that people see in other cities and wonder why we can’t do that here,” Sullivan said.

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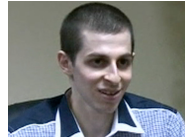
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