



# The Times

## Offices to rise from the ashes

### Developer eyes old cigar factory

Thursday, August 14, 2008

**BY BILL MOONEY**

TRENTON -- Mention of the city's commercial history often conjures up images of the once-venerable wire rope or rubber industries. Probably less well-known is that Trenton once was a center of cigar-making as well.

A developer has visions of taking one of the symbols of that bygone era, a vacant factory in the city's historic Chambersburg neighborhood, and turning it into prime office space. Daniel Brenna Jr., principal of Capital Real Estate Group and a native of Trenton, plans to convert the former American Cigar Factory at 176 Division St. into offices within the next nine to 12 months.

Brenna, who has concentrated on restoring and developing many properties over the last decade in and around Trenton, talks about the transformation of the long-disused manufacturing site as a labor of love. He plans to file a site plan application soon.

"I am committed to turning this historic, vacant building into a thriving business center, which will help revitalize the area," said Brenna, whose other high-profile project under way is a proposed 25-story, 700,000-square foot office tower that would be built in the shadow of the renovated Trenton Train Station.

The 75,000-square-foot cigar factory project may be smaller, but Brenna made it clear it is no less important to him. "My family originally came to Trenton in 1902," he said. "My roots are here."

There may be zoning issues to deal with in changing the property's use from manufacturing to office, but according to Brenna, the city has been cooperative in discussions. Mayor Douglas Palmer said that breathing new life into the factory could spur further development in that area.

"Certainly, Dan Brenna through his whole family lineage, being supportive and entrepreneurial and bullish about Trenton, is a developer that the city is fortunate to have take an interest in," Palmer said.

According to Brenna, the refurbished factory will be able to accommodate one large tenant or several smaller ones, and either way have the potential to offer employment to approximately 275 people altogether. It will have on-site parking, a shuttle to the train station approximately six blocks away, and a media and conference room.

In order to attract tenants in a rough economy, rents will be priced from \$10 to \$14 per square foot, excluding expenses. That is in contrast to rents in downtown Trenton that can range upward of \$25 per square foot, Brenna explained.

In addition, he said the state Economic Development Authority has grants and tax credits he hopes can be used to lure tenants as well. For example, he explained there is a business relocation grant that can be worth up to \$1,500 per employee to a prospective tenant.

The original section of the building, which had most recently been a furniture warehouse up until about three years ago, dates to 1890, Brenna said. He plans to retain original factory floors and exposed brick walls, and have ceilings of 12 to 14 feet. In addition, he hopes to have the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Brenna also wants to incorporate enough environmentally friendly features -- such as re-using rainwater, utilizing rooftop solar power, and installing sensors to monitor occupancy and lighting -- that the renovated

building will receive Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. RMJM Hillier Architecture will work on the project with Brenna's company.

"It's a challenge," Palmer said, "However, now is the time to work toward that, and hopefully, within another year to 18 months, the market will change. Him getting in now is a smart move on his part."

Approximately a half century ago, more than 3,000 people in Trenton were employed in rolling cigars from Cuban tobacco. And although the industry, along with the rubber companies, pottery works and wire rope makers, has largely faded from memory, the surviving buildings can still serve the city, according to Brenna.

According to Brenna, the key is to be creative, offering jobs in the city that people can reach by mass transit. "I think the city offers a lot more than the suburbs," he said.

Brenna's announcement was the second major commercial development involving a former cigar factory in Trenton this summer. In July, Grand Street Realty Association announced it had sold the Grand Court Villas, a 63-unit apartment complex at 507 Grand St. that years ago had been the home of the Clay, Henry and Block & Co. Cigar Factory, for \$6 million to Grand Court Villas following extensive renovations.

*Bill Mooney can be reached at [business@njtimes.com](mailto:business@njtimes.com) or at (609) 989-5688.*

©2008 Times of Trenton

© 2008 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.