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Developer plans lofts, offices and shipping-container shopping

By Jacob Barker St. Louis Post-Dispatch Oct 24, 2017



A 125-room hotel is planned at the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Locust Street by Midtown Alley developer Jassen . partnership with Tulsa developer Ross Group. Johnson says the group is in discussion with InterContinental Hotels Gr an EVEN brand hotel. (Credit: Trivers Associates)

One building at a time, Jassen Johnson has spent more than a decade working to turn the old industrial corridor between downtown and Grand Center into a hip district for creative types.

Now, he's gearing up for an ambitious, \$55 million bid to connect the area many now know as Midtown Alley to Downtown West and add a true gathering place for residents, workers and visitors.

Over the next two years, Johnson and his partners hope to rehab two vacant buildings into offices and lofts, add a hotel, build a parking garage and create a complex for retailers and restaurants out of shipping containers.

"What we're trying to do is take 15 years of work and finish it correctly," Johnson said.

Johnson, of Renaissance Development Associates, first has his sights on the Mendenhall Building (a name likely derived because of its former life as the home of Mendenhall Ford) at 2315 Locust Street, just east of Jefferson Avenue.



A rendering of the Mendenhall Building at 2315 Locust Street, which Renaissance Development Group plans to rehab into smaller office spaces. It's part of a larger group of projects Midtown Alley developer Jassen Johnson plans around Locust Street and Jefferson Avenue. (Rendering by Anthony Duncan Architect; courtesy of Jassen Johnson).

Johnson is partnering with Kenneth Nuernberger on the project. Work should start by the end of the year to turn the vacant 52,000-square-foot building into mostly smaller office spaces of between 1,000 and 2,500 square feet. It's the smaller spaces that are in short supply within the creative district, Johnson said, and "we're missing half our market" by not having enough of them.

"We're then going to be able to incubate a creative office user from co-working all the way up to about 10,000 square feet," he said.

There will be some space for a restaurant or two, and two larger spaces for anchor tenants that will take a little more than half the Mendenhall building. Scorch, a content marketing agency based a few blocks to the west, plans to be one of the initial anchor tenants, Johnson said.

By the summer, he hopes to start tackling the Beaumont Telephone Exchange Building, the historic structure at 2650 Locust Street once used as a long-distance telephone switching station. Partnering with the principals of Twain Financial Partners on the project, Johnson plans roughly 60 loft apartments and more office spaces in the 100,000-square-foot building — a feat that has eluded past developers.



The Beaumont Telephone Exchange Building, originally built in 1902, has been vacant since AT&T moved out in 1994. The building and its two subsequent additional wings, used as a long distance telephone switching station, are being converted into apartments. The exterior of the building with the original construction on the right and the additional sections added in the 1920s (center) and in 1946 (left) as seen on Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2014, at the 2600 block of Locust St. in St. Louis. The building backs up to the taller AT&T Toll Building on Olive St. and the two buildings are connected by two skybridges. Photo by Chris Lee, clee@post-dispatch.com

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To the east along Locust Street, Johnson said he's working with developer Ross Group out of Tulsa, Okla., on a 125-room hotel. The team is talking now with InterContinental Hotels Group about an EVEN brand hotel. A 250-car parking garage is also on the drawing board.

Across Locust, the envisioned draw for visitors and residents alike is a Boxyard development, in partnership with Nelson + Stowe Development. The Tulsa company has developed a similar concept in its home city, creating a retail and restaurant district out of cargo shipping containers.

Johnson's plans call for a similar concept on the north side of Locust Street, across from the hotel and Beaumont building, using some 80 shipping containers. He hopes coffee shops, microbreweries and other gathering venues can "create a sense of community" for the district he's helped shape.

Johnson is banking on New Market Tax Credits and historic tax credits to pull off the projects. But he says he expects to close on financing for at least the first phase of the Mendenhall Building rehab shortly after the city signs off on property tax abatement for the property. The first step was Tuesday. St. Louis's Land Clearance for Redevelopment authority gave its recommendation to 90 percent property tax abatement for 10 years.

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