

Chattanooga Times Free Press  
Thursday, June 21, 2001

## **Revival for Lovemans, at last**

The stripped and half-refurbished hull of the fine old Lovemans building at Market and Eighth streets has sat so long as a barren eyesore that many Chattanoogaans may have abandoned hope for its rejuvenation. The longer it lingered as an unfulfilled promise, the arger loomed the likelihood that its potential would crumble under a wrecking ball. Fortunately, the city now possesses a capable and growing core of can-do urban revivalists who don't quit easily. Their dedication paid off this week in the announcement that new owners quickly will pursue fortified plans to bring the Lovemans building back to life, a project that should anchor the redevelopment of the city's central business district. The developers, Nelson Bowers and Buck Schimpf, affirmed their plans Wednesday morning in a City Hall news conference that suggested the significance of the project to the city. Their plan, on which work will commence almost immediately, features five floors of condominium space and ground-floor commercial or retail space in a building restored to its original architectural character. Mayor Bob Corker underscored the importance of their project as a critical piece in rebuilding the heart of downtown, and as a crucial element in connecting the vibrant Riverfront area with the resurgent Southside.

The mayor also praised the developers' dedication both to the rejuvenation of the city and the preservation of its architectural fabric. Such dedication is becoming as typical of the city's rebirth as it is critical to that effort. As Mayor Corker observed, there are many other enterprises elsewhere in which Messrs. Schimpf and Bowers could have invested their time and resources for easier and greater return. That they chose instead to invest in the revitalization of the Lovemans building suggests their commitment to participating in the city's revival. Their purchase was assisted by RiverCity's able Ken Hays, and boosted in an 11th-hour conference of the seller and buyers called by the mayor when the deal appeared on the edge of collapse. That conference reinforces the notion that the Lovemans building project possesses a healthy measure of civic enterprise. The developers expect to devote three months just to the clean up and safety issues of the neglected structure while reconstruction plans are being readied. But they already

have lined up a top-flight team of architects and construction firms -- Artech Design Group, Andy Smith Architects and T.U. Parks Construction. And after a month of inspecting the building and assessing their prospects, Mr. Schimpf radiates confidence that they will produce by next summer what Mayor Corker predicts will be the “flagship” of the central business district.

While the Lovemans building restoration is crucial to progress in the heart of downtown, other elements of revitalization are set to occur that also will bolster momentum. Planning for adding 52 parking spaces along the 600, 700 and 800 blocks of a redefined Market Street now is being concluded, and work will commence soon. Planning and concept work almost is complete for six buildings on the east side of the 700 block of Market Street purchased last year by the RiverCity Co. for redevelopment.

Work also will begin soon to make Fourth Street a two-way boulevard. And before that project is completed, the EPB should break ground on a new office building in the vacant block bounded by Market, Broad and 10th streets and M.L.King Boulevard, freeing the existing EPB building for a residential development. The new office building opened recently by Chattanooga Land Co. on the north side of M.L. King Boulevard between Market and Broad was, indeed, just the first of several major developments slated to occur in the central business district. One bonus of the revival activity should be an improved opportunity to salvage the old Burchay’s building on Market Street, opposite the Lovemans building. Its value for redevelopment clearly just has received a shot in the arm.

The synergy created by these developments -- and two new downtown schools -- should produce within the next 18 months considerable new activity in the heart of downtown. It will be strengthened immeasurably by the efforts of Messrs. Schimpf and Bowers, and others, to bring residents and the pulse of 24-hour life back to the heart of the city.

None of this would be happening if city officials and civic leaders were not continually encouraging and nurturing rejuvenation downtown, and if risk-taking entrepreneurs were not willing collaborators. Chattanoogaans eying a Lovemans building largely abandoned for the past eight years may have begun to doubt the strength of the city’s revival to affect the central business district. Citizens should check again in 18 months. Further progress by then should be remarkable.