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Historic Gibbs Building will be redeveloped as a hotel

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A local development group plans to turn a historic building into a new hospitality venture for downtown San Antonio.

An entity known as 1909 Ltd. recently purchased the Gibbs Building, a 63,000-square-foot office property located at 105 N. Alamo. The price was not disclosed.

While 1909's plans for the property are still in their infancy, the goal is to take the building and redevelop it as a hotel, according to Reiss Realty's Billy Powers, the local broker who represented 1909 in the purchase of the property.

At present, about 39,000 square feet of space in the building is being marketed for office use. According to the Business Journal's first quarter 2005 issue of the Commercial Real Estate Journal, that space is currently 83 percent occupied.

The new owners purchased the property from TW-Downtown North Ltd. -- a group that is led by Tony Bradfield of locally based The Revel Group. While Bradfield had planned to renovate the Gibbs for condominiums, those plans hit a roadblock about a year ago, after the federal government opted to take a parking lot located one block away from the Gibbs for its own use -- a lot which Bradfield owned and had planned to dedicate to the planned condo's residents. While Bradfield was compensated for the lot, he says that without the parking, his plan no longer made financial sense.

"I did not have the confidence that the market (for condominiums) would be out there without the parking," Bradfield says.

Meanwhile a hotel operator, industry observers say, would likely have an easier time getting around the parking issue -- and would thus have the opportunity to take a piece of history and re-create it as a hospitality hot spot.

"It's a handsome property," says Ben Brewer, who is president of The Downtown Alliance/San Antonio. "(A hotel) will make a good conversion."

"It's in a great location," adds Gardner Peavy, a principal with locally based Cambridge Realty Group Inc. Peavy represented TW-Downtown in the sale. "It's in a part of downtown that is doing very well."

And it's a building that -- like nearby hotels such as the Emily Morgan and the Menger -- has a great history to it.

"If they can utilize as much of the (original) beauty as possible, it will be an awesome hotel," says Debra Maltz, who is the owner of Centro Properties -- a property management and leasing company that specializes in downtown projects. Maltz is also a current office tenant of the Gibbs. Like the other tenants, she will be vacating the property at the end of May, she says.

Indeed, as an office project, the building has been underutilized, says Maltz, although she admits that she will miss having space in the building there.

"It's such a cool building; I feel like a private eye," quips Maltz, referring to the rippled, frosted glass that still graces each office door. These solid-wooden doors also are adorned with brass doorknobs emblazoned with a "G."

The property is decked out with gray-marble tile throughout -- including the restrooms, adds Maltz. The lobby features an in-laid tile design of a five-point star with GIBBS spelled out on the points.

"It's a leap back in time," Bradfield says. "It's a wonderful project, just saturated with history ... It's a good project for what (1909 Ltd.) is doing. It will do well."

And it is likely to do especially well if the new owners remain mindful of the building's past, Maltz adds.

"It has the elements that I would appreciate as a hotelier; (they) would be a huge drawing card," Maltz says "It could be a lot of fun." .