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Pushing redevelopment north in OTR

*By Lisa Bernard-Kuhn
lbernard@enquirer.com*

An \$18.5 million plan to revive a series of vacant and deteriorating buildings is brewing near historic Findlay Market and the Rookwood Pottery Co. in Over-the-Rhine.

Chris Rose, president of the Rookwood, says he's among a group of investors scouting out development plans in the 1900 block of Race Street.

The block is bound by West McMicken and Findlay streets - just one block east of the old Christian Moerlein bottling facility that was damaged during a fire last weekend.

Details and financing haven't been finalized, but Rose says he envisions an arts campus that would include artist housing, a European-style bazaar for outdoor galleries, new restaurants and additional retail space.

Anchoring the development would be Rookwood Pottery at 1920 Race St. - where Rose's longer-term plans includes adding a public arts museum to its 100,000-square-foot headquarters.

The nearer-term project, he says, is a perfect fit for the neighborhood. Less than a block away, Findlay Market drew in more than 758,000 visitors in 2009 who spent \$29 million.

"There are natural synergies building between us (Findlay Market and Rookwood)," Rose says. "This is something that we think will really help the evolution of this area."

He declines to name his financial partners in the plan, adding that the group is looking into the availability of stimulus funding.

'Northern gateway'

Unlike the developing Gateway Quarter in Over-the-Rhine's southern half, where more than \$96 million has been invested in recent years, the neighborhood's northern streets have "largely being ignored," Rose says.

"We're inheriting a lot of the issues that used to be in the southern areas of Over-the-Rhine. On many streets, it's still very distressing up here."

Crime is down, but prostitution and drug trafficking remain problems, Rose says.

But the biggest contributor to blight and neighborhood deterioration are the scores of vacant buildings that line dozens of city blocks north of Liberty Street.

Of the estimated 280 vacant buildings in Over-the-Rhine, nearly three quarters - or roughly 200 - are located on streets north of Liberty, city records show.

"A lot of great things are happening in the Gateway Quarter, but that doesn't mean one part of the neighborhood should take priority over the other," Rose says. "We can't continue to completely ignore what's happening up here."

If successful, Rose believes his project would help spark creation of a "northern gateway" for the neighborhood.

Bob Pickford, president and CEO of the non-profit Corporation for Findlay Market, agrees.

"We're so excited to have that kind of vision and plan coming together," he says.

Pickford's group has development rights to about 40 city-owned properties and parcels surrounding the market - but high development costs and the recession have kept renovation plans at bay, he says.

As Rose's plans move forward, Pickford says the market will likely take another look at its development options.

"We both envision a very distinctive neighborhood, one that's lively and attractive to all sorts of the people - the creative class, artists and food enthusiasts," Pickford says.

'Momentum building'

Rose has been in discussions with The Model Group about potentially being a construction partner as plans come together.

The Walnut Hills-based developer has been heavily involved with work in the Gateway Quarter, having developed commercial and condominium projects including the Trinity Flats on Vine Street, Centennial Row on Race Street and the sold-out Bremen Lofts at 12th Street.

"If we've learned anything from the Gateway Quarter, we've learned that when you do something like this, you have to make a big splash," says Bobby Maly, vice president of Model. "You'd be hard pressed to find anything like this in the region. But we're not going to move on anything until Chris is ready to go."

Rose says he's eager to get started on the project this year, but declines to share more details.

"I can say there's a lot of momentum building," he says.

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