

Developer plans condos for Sawyer Motor Building

By Tim Reid

BUSINESS EDITOR

ASHEVILLE - Developer Harry Pilos will salute the past and look to the future Thursday as he kicks off his project to turn the Sawyer Motor Building into 20 luxury condominiums plus retail/office space.-

Fulfilling the vision of pioneering Asheville businessman Eugene C. Sawyer, who built the four-story brick landmark at the corner of Coxe and Hilliard avenues around 1926, Pilos will have a helicopter land on the roof and give rides over downtown Asheville to three lucky attendees.



He got the idea for a 1929 Asheville times newspaper interview with the building's namesake that stated, "Mr. Sawyer expects to see the aeroplane so perfected that the roof of the Sawyer Motor Co. building can be used as landing field."

"He didn't live to see his prediction fulfilled, but I thought it would be a great way to salute his vision that gave us this fabulous building," said Pilos, who is developing the property with Todd Zapolski of Durham and Leslie Rudd of Napa Valley, California. They have formed the SMB Partners Limited Liability Corp. to develop the building and four contiguous lots.

Twelve one-bedroom condominiums are planned on the third and fourth floors of the Sawyer Building. They will be ready for occupancy next February or March and will cost in the \$200,000 to \$365,000 range, Pilos said. The second floor of the building will be devoted to parking for condominium owners.

"The death knell of downtown is parking. We will have our own self-contained parking, and Coxe Avenue offers great ingress and egress," he said.

The Sawyer Motor Building at the corner of Coxe Avenue and Hilliard Avenue will be converted to luxury condominiums on the upper floors and retail/office on the ground floor.

SAWYER BUILDING CONDOMINIUMS

The Sawyer Motor building was built around 1926 by Eugene C. Sawyer, Asheville's first auto dealer. After housing a succession of car dealerships and other businesses over the years, the building was purchased by SMB Partners, who are converting it into 20 luxury condominiums on the top floors and retail/office space on ground level.

The condos will cost \$200,00 to \$365,000 and will feature garage parking with direct elevator access, a walkable roof with patio, ground floor storage, 11-foot ceilings, street art and landscaping, glass block-enclosed light wells and other features. They are scheduled for completion next February or March.

A by-invitation-only party to kick off the project will be held 5-7 p.m. Thursday, during which a helicopter will land on the roof and take selected participants for rides over the city.

Superior Construction of Greenville, S.C. is the general contractor, and Michael Hining and Associates of Chapel Hill, Durham and Asheville is the architect.

Information on the projects and the party is available by calling 251-1254 or at www.delphidevelopment.com

Buyers have signed contracts on five of the 20 condominiums, and Pilos believes he will have no problem selling the rest of them by the end of the year.

"Asheville is a unique place. People from all over the country are looking to live here in downtown," he said. "The fact that all these buildings sat in mothballs for 75 years and didn't get torn down, remodeled or reshaped in the '60s and '70s like so many places is a real treat.

"Downtown condos seem to appeal particularly to empty nesters in their 40s or older who are used to living in an urban setting, although younger buyers also are attracted. They like living in unique buildings and being able to walk to restaurants and shops," Pilos said.

"Although Sawyer's belief that people would be flying a lot of personal airplanes did not come true, the Sawyer Building's concrete roof will be a focal point for the new condo owners," Pilos said.

"He has completed a 2,500-square-foot patio on the roof that residents of the building will be able to use for parties, sun tanning or just enjoying the view," he said.

"I think being in an historic building has a charm of its own. Each of these buildings is spectacular, and you're buying a piece of history, a piece of art. You get to live in it, and you get tax credits too," said Pilos.

The Sawyer Motor Building will be similar to several earlier projects along Patton Avenue and Haywood Street in the heart of downtown. These typically involve turning the mostly unused upper floors into residential while using the ground floor for retail space.

The Sawyer will be different in two respects, according to the developer.

Pilos believes it is the first such condominium project to have its own self-contained parking garage. Owners will use a security card to enter the second floor garage, where they can park their car and take the elevator.

And it is the first such project undertaken along Coxe Avenue in an area that for many years was the center of Asheville's car dealerships but has been underutilized in recent years, with a lot of business turnover and vacant lots.

Pilos said that in addition to the Sawyer Building, several other projects are planned along the street that will "transition" the neighborhood.

George Morosani plans to turn the three-story building at 162 Coxe Ave. into an office building with a parking deck next door. Swannanoa Cleaners will locate in a former car parts store on Coxe Avenue.

Midtown Plaza, an 1,800-square-foot office development, was completed last year at 84 Coxe Ave.

After they complete the Sawyer Building, Pilos and his partners plan to construct a new 4-6-story building on property they own next to it, with parking in between the two buildings.

"The ground floor of the Sawyer Building will be subdivided into six retail spaces," Pilos said.

He was unsuccessful in getting the French Broad Food Co-op to locate there but hopes that some sort of food business, perhaps a deli, wine store or small grocery, will locate there.

Sawyer's daughter, Pat Denison, will be a special guest at Thursday's kickoff celebration, which will be by invitation only. (Call 251-1254 for information).

"We'll be saying goodbye to an era and honoring one man's vision," Pilos said. "We'll also kick off what will be a major urban renewal project. This (and other developments in the area) will change the direction of Coxe Avenue."