

Developer has lofty plans for North Tonawanda site

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Author: Laura E. Winchester

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The proposed developer for the \$14 million conversion of the former Remington Rand Building has a track record in New York City and Buffalo.

Since 1998, Anthony M. Kissling of Kissling Interests LLC has spent millions acquiring residential and commercial properties in Buffalo, many of which are considered architectural and historic gems.

Kissling, the fourth generation to operate the company founded by his great-grandfather in 1870, also has several commercial and residential properties in New York City. He hopes to keep his family success streak going in North Tonawanda, where he plans to convert a former manufacturing building into 51 lofts and mixed-used commercial space that includes a maritime museum.

Citing an agreement with the seller, Kissling has declined to comment on the project, announced Sept. 13, until the sale is finalized.

The project involves a major renovation of the four-story 1895 building at 162- 184 Sweeney St., across from Gateway Harbor, currently owned by Wurlitzer Park Complex LLC. A schematic design has been drafted by Tommaso Briatico Architects of Buffalo with the help of the University at Buffalo School of Architecture.

Renovation costs have been estimated to be at least \$14 million and are separate from the purchase price.

The genesis of the plan developed during the administration of Mayor David Burgio, who was succeeded in January by Lawrence V. Soos, a former alderman and longtime friend and political ally of Burgio.

Part of the site is a small red building that at one time was the power house for Buffalo Niagara Electric Railway Co. and later a factory for Herschell Spillman Co., which made carousels.

>Former printing plant

The 150,000-square-foot Remington Rand Building housed a printing plant where thousands

worked for about 50 years before it closed in the 1970s. It currently houses a few small businesses and storage.

Community Development Director James Sullivan said Kissling has plans to help the existing businesses relocate.

A major component of the project will be a 10,000-square-foot museum, the new home of the Niagara Frontier Chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society.

The project's announcement startled the North Tonawanda History Museum's board of trustees and many of the museum's 2,000 members because it did not include the Lumber City History Center.

According to a statement issued by the museum, officials are "not disappointed" in not being included in the project but are "very put out that no one, not the Kissling people or our city people, had the courtesy to let us know [before the announcement] that we weren't even being considered."

The museum hopes to relocate soon from cramped quarters on Oliver Street to the former Lowry Middle School on Payne Avenue, which is being converted into the Gersh Experience, a college-level school for students with neurobiological disorders.

According to the museum statement, officials remain focused on obtaining funding, including government grants, to create a permanent collection storage facility, exhibit hall, reference library and administrative offices at Lowry.

And it is exploring "other options" for the History Center, which it still wants to locate in the "Erie Canal/historic downtown area."

>The loft plan

The state-of-the-art lofts on the Remington Rand building's top three floors would each be about 1,200 to 1,800 square feet in size. There would be ground-floor common areas, including conference rooms. A rooftop garden and indoor parking also are planned.

Common to major cities like New York, the live/work loft units would appeal to artists, young entrepreneurs starting up high-tech companies, incubator companies and empty-nesters, according to Gregory Sehr, president of Buffalo-based Upstate Consultants, which works with Kissling Interests.

In June, Kissling announced plans to convert a 22,000-square-foot former casket warehouse and showroom at 430 Virginia Place in Buffalo's Allentown District into 10 loft units.

At the time, Kissling said, "We've been getting a lot of calls for this type of unit, and it is something that doesn't really exist right now in the Buffalo market."

Buffalo also will soon be home to ArtSpace, a 36-unit work/live complex catering to the arts

community being done by another developer.

Soos said the Remington Rand project would be similar to the redevelopment of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Larkin Building on Exchange Street, Buffalo, home to several businesses.

Kissling, who divides his time between Manhattan and Buffalo, owns more than a dozen local apartment buildings, mostly along Delaware Avenue in Buffalo.

"Delaware Avenue, to me, is like Park Avenue in New York. It's the best street in the city," Kissling has said. "I love Buffalo. I love its architecture and layout. To me, it is a gorgeous city."

His company also owns Cathedral Place, an office building at 298 Main St., and another office building at 268 Main St., both in Buffalo.

Kissling Interests also is close to finalizing a long-pending deal to acquire the former Pierce-Arrow auto plant in North Buffalo, which it plans to convert into a technology center.

>Architecture key

From its debut in Buffalo, Kissling Interests has been particularly interested in architecturally significant buildings dating to Buffalo's golden years of the late 1800s to the late 1920s, when the Queen City was one of the wealthiest in the nation.

The company completely renovated many of the apartment buildings it purchased, including remodeling kitchens, updating bathrooms, installing thermo-pane windows, restoring mahogany doors and window trim, refinishing hardwood floors and replacing heating systems.

Sullivan, North Tonawanda's community development director, and Soos predicted a "spin-off" from the Remington Rand Building in both attracting other new development and creating a larger customer base for the city's existing businesses.

Sehr predicted the project -- which would also include a restaurant -- would create 50 new jobs in its first year. Sullivan has said the project will not involve tax abatements.

And its location on the Erie Canal is a boon, officials said, particularly for the Western New York Maritime Heritage Center planned by the Antique and Classic Boat Society.

Society President Rich DeGlopper of the Town of Tonawanda said the canal location is vital to the project's success. He noted boaters can dock in front of the building.

"This whole area figures pretty prominently in the history of boat building, engine development and boat racing," DeGlopper said. "Just 500 yards down [Sweeney Street] was the Richardson Boat plant."

Niagara Street in Buffalo was home to the Jafco Sea Master, Sweitzer boats and Sterling boat engines, and "the forerunner of the fiberglass boat industry was pioneered by Hank Canazzi on Niagara Street," he said. Also in the area were Mang Boats in Niagara Falls and Cayuga Boat in

Cheektowaga.

"The point is that the whole westward development of the country was related to someone having the vision to build the 'Clinton Ditch,' which connected the Atlantic to the Great Lakes. So it's natural that so much boat building and engine manufacturing was done on the Niagara Frontier," DeGlopper said.

"We want to capture and showcase that history for tourists who will come from all over the country," he said, adding that the city has "a lot of great plans for the waterfront, and this project will be a cornerstone."

The society is applying for a \$25,000 grant through the New York State Canal Corp., DeGlopper said. Financing will be a combination of private and public funding. There is no estimate yet on costs for the Maritime Heritage Center. "We don't even have a lease yet," he said.

>Grant sought

Exhibitions of maritime artifacts, including information and vintage film footage on the greats in the boat racing world, is one part of the center.

"We plan to showcase boating, including the Richardson boats and others built on Tonawanda Island" during World War II. He noted among the society's collections is "The Half Boat," handcrafted by a patternmaker in North Tonawanda and half restored, thus the name; and a life boat from the Canadiana that the society restored.

"I'm calling it a living/working museum because we will include a section where people can work on motors and do restoration work on boats. The back of the building will be a real hands-on area," DeGlopper said.

The retired director of technology for the Kenmore-Tonawanda School District said the society also wants to have programs for schoolchildren that could involve building a watercraft like a kayak or hydroplane. "They would gain a love of boating as well as work with their hands," he said.

He said old-fashioned speedboat rides on the nearby Niagara River could also be part of the center's programs.

Carmella Mantello, director of the Canal Corp., said the grant application from the boat society is among 81 received.

"We have \$10 million from the state" for canal-related projects, she said. Grant recipients are expected to be announced by early October. The city is also seeking an \$80,000 grant for more docking improvements at Gateway Harbor.

Mantello said the Remington Rand proposal is a "unique public-private project" that meets the agency's goal of getting "communities to capitalize on the canal at their front door."

"We see it as significant," she said, "because it incorporates educational, historical and recreational

amenities."

e-mail: lwinchester@buffnews.com