

Seneca: What's taking so long?

When Campus Apartments purchased the Seneca Hotel more than a year ago, plans were for the historic but dilapidated building on East Broad Street to undergo the renovation long needed to make it viable again ("New life for the Seneca"-April 2005). Yet for months, passersby saw little evidence of any restoration at the downtown landmark. The ground-floor windows remained boarded up, a chain-link fence blocked the structure's entrances. What's taken so long? David Adelman, president and CEO of Campus

Apartments, says they'd been waiting for a couple of checks to help offset some of the estimated \$15 million needed to complete their ambitious plans to turn the Seneca into a mixed-used development of apartments and street-level retail.

Now, those payments have arrived. Campus Apartments received \$750,000 in Clean Ohio Funds from the state and another \$1.15 million from Capitol South Community Urban Redevelopment Corp. With money in the bank, work was expected to have begun last month on the 89-year-old building.

It doesn't look like much now. The inside is full of asbestos, garbage left from vagrants and the remains of long-dead pigeons. Ceilings on each of the building's 10 floors are crumbling from water damage caused by a leaking roof. But there are traces of the building's glamorous past under all the soggy debris. Pink marble floors still glimmer after almost 20 years of neglect. On the third floor, intricate crown moldings line the 18-foot-high ceilings. Project manager Kevin Putman says the idea is to preserve as much of the original structure as possible. He estimates cleanup will take four months to complete, followed by a year of construction and rehab work. "I am so anxious to start, so we can see what was left behind," Putman says. "There is a lot of cool stuff"

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Campus Apartments paid \$1.5 million for the Seneca, perhaps saving it from becoming another parking lot. The old hotel had been vacant for nearly two decades. "It's a great building," says Kate Matheny of the Columbus Landmarks Foundation. "This is the only residential hotel still standing in Columbus. There is a lot of push to demolish vacant buildings. It's safe to say that would have happened with the Seneca." Adelman sees the revamped Seneca as being an anchor of the Discovery District, catering to both students and professors of the nearby Columbus College of Art and Design, Capital Law School and Columbus State. "Columbus needs some great rental stock," he says. "There are lots of condos, but no [downtown] rentals." "It's just one of those hidden treasures," he adds. "With a restaurant, or a coffee shop, it will be a place where people will really hang out. The vision is to get people to live downtown. In order for a city to prosper you have to get people on the street."

▼ Sara Smith

It will take more than a push broom to clean up almost 20 years of neglect, as work begins to transform the Seneca Hotel (above left) into an apartment building.

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