

Kent block to get makeover \$2.5 million first phase to include chamber building

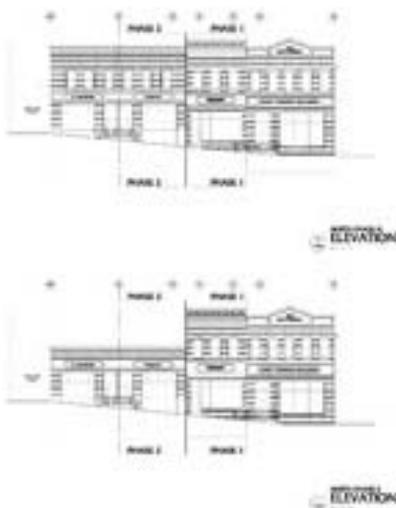
Matt Fredmonsky
April 25, 2008

In the next three years, Kent residents will see an approximate reinvestment of up to \$6.5 million into the city's core commercial district.

For months, the Phoenix Project " what sounds like a secretive government initiative " has been a loosely kept secret in Kent circles. This week, Ron Burbick, the man behind the plan, detailed his grand scheme for the re-creation of several buildings on East Main Street in downtown Kent. Burbick plans to break ground on the first phase on June 1, with construction of each additional phase beginning the following spring.



Burbick, who owns three buildings on the south side of East Main stretching from the existing Kent Area Chamber of Commerce and Leadership Portage County offices to Flasher Cleaners, is in the process of acquiring a fourth " the house adjacent to the old Kent hotel.



All four properties will become part of a redevelopment project to add a second story to two buildings, create additional office space and possibly residential units. The house will be demolished to make way for a half-dozen small artisan shops that will face the alleyway and future pedestrian walkway, Burbick said. "And that will become like a little shopper's arcade there," he said.

The project will be completed in three phases. The second and third phases could be consolidated. Phase one, estimated to cost \$2.5 million, will include the complete renovation of the chamber building and what, until last month, housed Einstein's Attic. "It will also include adding a second floor to those two buildings that will house office space," Burbick said. "And that will include a totally new facade on the building. And part of Phase One is also putting a new facade on the face of the Planned Parenthood office and the cleaners' building.

"Now currently phase two involves adding a second story to the building that's the cleaners and the Planned Parenthood," Burbick said. "That may change. That will ultimately be done, but it may be done in Phase Three rather than Phase Two."

During construction, the chamber offices will be relocated to 126 W. College Ave., chamber executive director Bill Hoover said. He expects the move to begin at the end of next month.

The majority of the businesses and operations will be temporarily relocated during the construction before returning to their new locations.

"Any time you have to move there's some stress involved with the dislocation, but we view it as extremely positive and we're glad to be part of a project that will be a great upgrade for (East) Main Street and downtown Kent," Hoover said.

When asked about the overall cost, Burbick chuckled. He said the other phases' costs have not yet been finalized.

"I would guess each phase would probably be in the \$2 million range," he said.

Burbick played a strong financial role by providing start-up funding to the fledgling Main Street Kent organization last year. His independent non-profit agency, The Burbick Foundation, has provided funding to service agencies throughout Portage County. The foundation's offices will be housed in the new project.

Burbick is a legal resident of St. Petersburg, Fla., but he spends his summers in the Kent area. Though not born here, Burbick has lived in Kent for about 35 years and considers it is hometown.

"Hopefully, this is going to serve as an example to the rest of the community of what can be done in downtown Kent," he said.

Burbick is working to attract some as-yet unnamed retail and commercial operations for the expected new space. The buildings will incorporate green elements and will be ADA-accessible.

Dan Smith, Kent's director of economic development, said the city plans to work with Fairmount Properties to connect Burbick's pedestrian walkway into the firm's planned redevelopment project to serve as a physical connector between both blocks. Smith said the new square footage in the Phoenix Project could create 30 to 40 new jobs based on the plans he has reviewed.

"We're hoping that (Burbick's) project kicks off additional investment," Smith said. "We've been talking about all these projects on the horizon, but this one's actually going to start taking place."