

Former Detroit firehouse may open as hotel in '17

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(Photo: Daniel Mears / Detroit News)

The Chicago-based hotel group that announced in summer 2014 it would convert Detroit's old fire department headquarters into a boutique hotel says the project may be finished in early 2017, perhaps in time for next year's North American International Auto Show.

The downtown firehouse, on the corner of Larned and Washington, is across the street from Cobo Center, the city's main convention center. The brick firehouse's previous auto show function was primarily as a media and hospitality suite for what was then Chrysler Corp.

The historical building is now owned by Aparium Hotel Group. Executives for the Chicago group confirmed that now, 20 months since announcing the project, they have secured the \$34 million financing.

"Acting as owner, co-developer and manager, Aparium — working hand-in-hand with developer Walter Cohen — is in the midst of transforming the historic Detroit Fire Department Headquarters into the Foundation Hotel," a statement from the hotel group read. "The 100-room independent hotel adds another piece to the ongoing Detroit renaissance."

Detroit's downtown hotel scene is experiencing a boom, with two major 300- to 400-room hotels in the works. The Foundation Hotel is just one of the smaller historic structures being converted into upscale boutique hotels.

The trend is sparked by the rebounding auto industry, a steadily improving downtown and the expanded Cobo convention center, which has now completed a \$279 million upgrade.

Other new hotel plans for downtown:

Arena hotel: A new 350-400 room hotel to be built next to new hockey arena by Olympia Development of Michigan on a thoroughly revamped portion of the Interstate 75 service drive. The hotel is on the southern edge of the massive new Red Wings hockey arena, along with new residential, retail and offices. Olympia aims to open the hotel in time for the debut of the arena in September 2017. The name and partner in the hotel development are expected to be revealed soon.

The Metropolitan: A downtown building that's been empty for nearly 40 years is expected to get a \$32 million makeover and reopen as an extended-stay hotel with ground-floor retail. Work already has begun on the tall, narrow Gothic-like structure at 33 John R, which has been graffiti-riddled and thoroughly vandalized for decades. An opening date has not been set.

Wurlitzer Hotel: New York firm ASH NYC is overseeing a \$22-million makeover of the slender, once-crumbling Wurlitzer Building, 1509 Broadway, into a 109-room hotel. Last fall, the developers told state economic officials they aim to have the hotel open in winter 2017.

Joe Louis Arena site: The Financial Guaranty Insurance Co., one of the city's former bankruptcy creditors, has development rights for a potential 300-plus-room hotel on the site of the riverfront arena, which is slated for demolition after the Red Wings move. Details of the plan have yet to be announced.

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