

News-Press

November 16, 1999

Section: Business

Page: 1D

Courthouse helps downtown efforts

Dick Hogan

Staff

News-Press

By DICK HOGAN The News-Press

Rolf Wagschal's strategy for building a new office building for lawyers is simple: Here comes the judge.

That's judge as in the U.S. district judge expected to be named soon to take up permanent residence in the federal courthouse in downtown Fort Myers.

Wagschal recently bought an 8,000-square-foot building on Hendry Street for \$890,000 from Darlene and Kevin Jursinski, who run KC Sports Management Inc. in the building. They will stay on to manage it.

Ed Bonkowski, owner of Quantum Investment Corp., represented Wagschal in the deal.

Wagschal said he intends to expand to the north with at least another 28,000 square feet starting next year, specializing in attorneys as tenants for the building.

The market for that concept - with access to an online law library and conference rooms available on site - should take off when the judge is appointed, he said.

President Clinton recently vetoed a bill that provided for the judge, but Congress is working on a revised measure that would accomplish the same thing.

Wagschal also sees signs that the downtown economy in general is turning around after a long period of stagnation and false starts.

"When I started coming here 25 years ago from Chicago, there were bumps in the road everywhere, people sleeping on the streets at night," he said. "Now there are nice new office buildings, beautification."

Jursinski, an attorney who also operates his practice in the Hendry Street building, noted that downtown had a high concentration of judicial and government office buildings even before the courthouse opened last year.

Kim Jack, whose Dean Hotel development also includes 15 offices along with the Morgan House restaurant and apartments, said he also has seen interest because of the new courthouse.

"A lot of my tenants are of the legal fraternity, and that's tied to the federal courthouse."

Being able to lease a single suite is useful, he said, because "You don't have to be a part of a large law firm" to have a desirable location.

Don Paight, executive director of the city Downtown Redevelopment Agency, said he noticed a wave of developers who started their plans about five years ago after plans for the courthouse were announced.

Besides the Dean, he noted Patio de Leon, the Collier Arcade and the Franklin Arms as renovation projects in downtown that started in that time period.

"Most of that private investment started when the federal courthouse contract was signed."

- Dick Hogan can be reached at 335-0432.

PHOTO CAPTION

WAGSCHAL

FOLLOW THE COURTHOUSE: This is an artist's rendering of a new downtown Fort Myers office complex expected to break ground early next year. Not available Drawing courtesy of KYLE KITCHENS/Special to The News-Press