

Live. Work. Play. Create... Thrive.

National Geographic Top Ten Worldwide Destination

Bookless Building Project

Start now in sight

- Renovations are scheduled to begin on Sept. 1.

By Dick Lindsay

Berkshire Eagle Staff

LEE — The local businessman redeveloping the Bookless building on Main Street expects the project to finally begin by the end of the month.

On Thursday, Michael McManmon said once he secures a building permit from the town, the renovation at 40-50 Main St. will likely begin by Sept. 1.

McManmon is anxious to start the \$2.9 million project he first proposed in July 2008. He had hoped to begin the restoration in January, but encountered several delays after the Lee Planning Board approved the project in December.

"I'll feel relieved when we are actually in there and get going," he said on Thursday.

Town officials and business leaders, who've supported the project all along,

BOOKLESS, continued on [B4](#)



The Bookless building on Main Street in Lee is scheduled to be renovated by Lee businessman Michael McManmon.

Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff

[See BOOKLESS on Page B04](#)

Renovations to Bookless building scheduled to begin on Sept. 1

BOOKLESS from B1

also can't wait for workers to begin refurbishing the 134- year- old structure.

"It's a downtown icon in Lee and [having] nothing in there now is sad," said Danielle Mullen, executive director of the Lee Chamber of Commerce.

McManmon has hired Allegrone Construction Co. of Pittsfield as the general contractor to refurbish the historic threestory building, which includes restoring the original facade. The project is scheduled to be completed by May 31, 2011.

The upper two floors of Bookless are being converted into an educational center for McManmon's Lee-based College Internship Program (CIP) and add up to four retail stores on the first floor in the former H. A. Johansson's storefront. A manicure shop and tanning salon are currently the only tenants in the building — originally known as the Baird and Benton Block.

CIP, which was founded in Lee by McManmon in 1983, helps young adults with Asperger's syndrome — a high-functioning form of autism — and other learning difficulties get a college education or begin a career through local internships. Several years ago, CIP expanded into Indiana, California and Florida, with additional facilities being proposed in other states. Originally, McManmon had planned to house CIP's national headquarters in the Bookless building, but he and his staff decided relocating the educational programs from the Berkshire Center on Park Street to the 134-year-old structure was a better idea.

"We can expand out our student base as the upper floors are better laid out than using a hodge-podge of renovated houses," McManmon said. CIP currently owns seven buildings in the Park Street area, used for the education and lodging of 40 to 50 students in Lee.

McManmon said when the Bookless project is completed, the Berkshire Center will be used for office space as part of CIP's national headquarters to help manage its continued expansion.

"We plan to open several new programs around the country and maybe go international too," he said.

In addition, McManmon's daughter, Emmy Davis, is in expansion mode. Davis and her husband Ryan plan to open a creperie — an eatery that specializes in crepes — in the Bookless building.

The couple already runs The Green Grocer, a health food store and cafe on Park Street that's within walking distance of the Bookless block on Main Street.

"Here, we get a lot of local traffic, but it'll be nice to be on the beaten path," said Emmy Davis.

Meanwhile, the town's project to build a 61-space parking lot that will benefit the Bookless building project and other downtown businesses has already begun. A surveyor has been hired to map out the lot behind the east side of Main Street, according to Richard Vinette, executive director of the Lee Community Development Corp., which is overseeing the project.

Last month, Lee received a \$735,000 state grant toward the construction of the new parking lot.

To reach Dick Lindsay: rlindsay@berkshireeagle.com, or (413) 496-6233.