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Building

on success

College program to transform Lee church into arts center

By Dick Lindsay

Berkshire Eagle Staff

LEE — A local businessman plans to add another historic landmark to his downtown revitalization project.

Michael McManmon and his Lee-based College Internship Program is poised to buy St. George's Episcopal Church on Franklin Street and turn it into a visual and performing arts center. McManmon and church officials expect to close the deal in early May, costing CIP up to \$375,000 for the purchase of and necessary renovations to the 154-year-old stone structure.

McManmon vows to retain St. George's architectural integrity by simply installing new interior lights, a natural gas heating system and possibly a west-side entrance. "I'm not going to butcher anything," he said. Meanwhile, the local Episcopalians are pleased the church will be in good hands.

"We really think it's a great use of the space," said St. George's spokesman Rick Gore.

The 50-member congregation is temporarily holding Sunday services jointly with St. James Episcopal Church in Great Barrington at the Crissy Farm Banquet Cater Facility off Stockbridge Road. St. James was displaced a few years ago, when its stone church on Main Street was deemed unsafe.

St. George's has already sold its rectory to the town, which will be razed to make way for a new 61-space public parking lot, also with a July 1 completion date. The proceeds from both real estate transactions will be set aside for St. George's new house of worship.

"Our vision is to create a new church with someone else in South County," Gore said.

As for McManmon's proposed arts center, it will meld into his original \$3.7 million restoration and renovation of the mostly vacant Baird & Benton block, scheduled to be completed by July 1. The upper two floors of the 135-year-old historic threestory building are being converted into classrooms and office space for CIP and include an art gallery and eatery 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 and have remained open during the restoration.

CIP, which was founded in Lee

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Michael McManmon, principal developer for the restoration and renovation of the Baird & Benton block, discusses the progress of the \$3.7 million project. He plans to purchase St. George's Episcopal Church, top, and convert it into a visual and performing arts center.

Photos by Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff



A worker for Allegrone Construction Co. brings lumber into the interior of the Baird & Benton block.

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Principal developer of Bookless building plans art center

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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.

McManmon expects the arts center to be a year- round venue for surrounding communities focusing on children and adolescent theater, in addition to helping CIP students express themselves.

"These kids are very visual," he said. "They are into art and drama and that fits into the mission with our students."

McManmon noted the arts center will have a soft opening this summer, with a full schedule of events planned for 2012. Town officials foresee the arts center enriching Lee's downtown revitalization.

"We're really glad the church can be saved and pleased with plans for its reuse," said Board of Selectmen Chairman Gordon Bailey.

Meanwhile, the general contractor, Allegrone Construction Co. of Pittsfield, is on schedule with the interior renovation of the Baird & Benton block, also known as the Bookless building, with the exterior restoration in doubt.

"The inside is on time, but the outside is the hard part since it's weather-dependent," McManmon said.

CIP currently owns nine other buildings in the Park Street area, primarily used for the education and lodging of 42 students in the Lee program dubbed Berkshire Center, which employs 18 people. Another 18 staff the Leebased national headquarters, as CIP operates educational facilities in Indiana, California and Florida, western New York and soon overseas in London.

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Michael McManmon says that he won't change the architecture of St. George's Episcopal Church when he converts it into an arts center. 'I'm not going to butcher anything,' he said.

Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff