

At Springfield's Court Square, 31 Elm, 'a jewel' emerges from the rough

Sep. 25, 2022

By Jim Kinney | jkinney@repub.com



Gov. Charlie Baker views progress of 31 Elm St. project in Springfield's Court Square

SPRINGFIELD – [Gov. Charlie Baker](#) this week saw the view up Main Street from what will – in just one year's time – be a new apartment on the third floor of long-derelict [13-31 Elm St.](#) on Springfield's Court Square.

What the chief executive didn't see as he walked through unfinished but framed-out walls on Thursday was panel after panel of wooden wainscot, all dating back to the building's construction in 1892. It was all carefully removed for construction on the \$62.8 million project, numbered and stored to be put back as work moves toward a completion.

"This building is really a jewel," said Michael D. Binette, senior partner and managing director at the Architectural Team in Boston, one of the designers on the project. "It's so unusual that a building like this, which was left empty for so long, retains so much of its historic fabric. All the details like the wainscot, the gorgeous open stairways. All that is being retained."

The "jewel" is also getting a new setting as the city Department of Public Works and its Parks and Recreation Department are planning a \$6 million rehab of the streets, sidewalks and parkland surrounding 31 Elm and Court Square.

"We've been, as a city, looking at this for a long time," said public works commissioner Christopher M. Cignoli.

Both the building renovation and the park, road and sidewalk improvements are targeted to be done in October 2023, Cignoli said.

A few blocks away, the \$30-million to-\$40-million demolition and replacement of the Civic Center Garage parking structure should be completed by late [2023 or early 2024](#).

"So all of that comes together in a way that's really going to be transformative for that area," Binette said.

The parking garage, 31 Elm and the Court Square improvements all emphasize boosting foot traffic through downtown Springfield.

"Getting people on the sidewalks is what creates a more welcoming and safer place to be. A busier sidewalk is much more comfortable," Binette said, echoing sentiments Mayor Domenic J. Sarno shared on the tour and often in other settings.

Binette added, "Quiet sidewalks tend to instill a little bit more fear, especially at nighttime."

At 13-31 Elm Street – rebranded as ThirtyOne Elm Street, the first floor retail space will be devoted to a new restaurant from investor Peter A. Picknelly, chairman and CEO of Peter Pan Bus Lines, and BEAN Restaurant Group run by the Yee family who work with Picknelly on restaurant concepts as varied as the Fort and Student Prince and White Hut.

The restaurant – Picknelly said he's leaning toward the Elm Tree as a name – will have a wine cellar, two private dining rooms and, getting to Binette's point about sidewalks, about 80 of its 240 seats outside.

"It will look very inviting," said Edison Yee. "It will be part of our chop-house concept. Classic American cuisine, approachable to the customer."

Picknelly said he hopes it will be the best restaurant in town.

"A year from now, we'll be open," said Picknelly as he pointed out that his son, Peter B. Picknelly, will be the first apartment tenant. "This is a for-real thing."

Peter A. Picknelly's late father, Peter L. Picknelly, who died in 2004, originated plans to rehab the building.

"Our family has been involved in this project for 30 years," Peter A. Picknelly said. "In part because it is so important to the city of Springfield."

The importance of 13-31 Elm was matched by the number of roadblocks thrown in its way. It's funded with money from the state, city, investors including Picknelly and the WinnCompanies, of Boston, and with federal tax credits and with money that MGM Springfield promised the city to create more downtown housing.

Earlier this year, WinnCompanies and Picknelly said cost overruns added \$13 million to the project. The state was willing to kick in \$6.5 million additional, but only if the city matched it. City councilors balked, citing the last-minute request, but, bowing to the high profile of the project, transferred the money from the city's free cash account.

Michael O'Brien, vice president of WinnCompanies, said the project is adhering to its new budget and snags in the supply chain of building products are largely unkninked. Overall, the project is about 35% complete with 90% of the demolition completed.

"It's coming along," he said. "We'll be done on time."

It will have 74 apartments with 49 one-bedroom and 25 two-bedroom. The apartments will also be split by income: 59 market-rate units and 15 workforce units.

It is early for final rent setting, WinnCompanies said. But the company anticipates a rough range for market rent for a one-bedroom to be between \$1,400 to \$1,600 depending on unit amenities, view, and the like.

Outside, Cignoli said the city will replace sidewalk and roadways in front of the building and near First Church with new pavers. The old bricks date back to 1980.

The Court Square park will get repairs. They won't do a lot of changes to layout, except for moving the bus shelter and creating a bump-out in the street for Pioneer Valley Transit Authority buses to get out of traffic for pick-up and drop-off.

Cignoli said the city received \$1.5 million in community mitigation funds from the state [Gaming Commission](#) and is awaiting another \$4.5 million in infrastructure grants from the state to assist with those repairs.