



Face lift for ex-Lerner building

Windows back in plan for new eateries, offices

By Tim Steller
 ARIZONA DAILY STAR

A building at Downtown's central corner, Congress and Stone, is sporting sure signs of improvement — windows.

Construction workers are remodeling the former Lermer ladies' apparel store, 1 E. Congress St., to make room for restaurants and offices.

To make the change, they are peking holes in the thick skin the building grew back in 2000, when it was to become a major telecommunications center.

The former Lermer building was remodeled to hold switches, servers, cables and everything else necessary to support power-hungry, bandwidth-intensive companies. It wasn't meant for people. After a million-dollar remodeling, the building's facade was a thick and jagged wall of high-tech style.

The building was more attractive than a so-called "telecommunications hotel" might have been, but — in keeping with security requirements — it had no windows.

Unfortunately for then-owner Terrence Plas, the telecommunications company that was to place its equipment in the building dropped its plans. Bank One now owns the building.

Now PFCOR real estate brokers are seeking restaurants and offices to occupy the approximately 26,000-square-foot structure.

The plan, said brokers Tom Nieman and Joanne Garispy, is to have food businesses on the 6,500-square-foot ground floor, offices on the second, and either offices, meeting rooms or storage space in the basement.

The first floor may take the form of a mall-style food court, Nieman said. In that case, the public would enter the floor and find vendors arrayed around the outside.

The alternative is that each tenant would rent a separate space, which customers would enter from outside doors along the sidewalk, Nieman said.

"We're still defining which is the best way to go," Garispy said.

Among the deciding factors may be which restaurants sign on at the building.

There are three deals in the works, Garispy said, but she said she couldn't identify the potential tenants other than to say they are both national and local.



The building at Congress Street and Stone Avenue was first remodeled in 2000, without the windows, to become a telecommunications center. Amnon J. Latham / Staff

Whichever form the ground floor takes, the outdoor space between the Lermer building and the Pima County Assessor's offices next door to the east will become an outdoor patio with seating for the food vendors, Nieman said.

Armsy Park resident Michael Leckrone, a longtime activist for Downtown redevelopment, is dismayed the prime property is not being put to a more special purpose befitting its location.

"That should have been an anchor for the rest of Downtown. But it's going to be a food court," Leckrone said.

"There ought to be something smarter, more sophisticated to do with it than a lunchtime food court, because it's still going to be empty at night," he added.

At the very least, restaurants in the building should stay open at night and serve something more than coffee and sandwiches, he said.

The building is going to take on a slightly more historical feel — at least on the interior.

Among the changes Caylor Construction workers are making is tearing down some of the drywall on the interior walls to expose the old brick.

"We're restoring a lot of that to bring back the old feel," Nieman said.

All in all, it's a use for the

building that fits better into the city's plans for Downtown than the telecommunications center did, said John Uptlike, project manager of the public-private Rio Nuevo Downtown revitalization project.

"We're frankly excited about where they're headed with the restaurant and upper floor use," Uptlike said. "It's a far better use for such a key Downtown space than equipment."

"That's the kind of thing people need to see to realize there are changes Downtown."

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The building as it looked before the remodel a few years ago. Julie Scott / Staff