Written by Steve Ostermann
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Renovation, expansion of downtown landmark make eye-catching progress

A face-lift that will give new life to one of Grafton’s most prominent downtown landmarks is well under way.

RENOVATION AND expansion of the former Grafton Hotel is proceeding this summer. The upgrades include a 6,700-square-foot addition at the south end of the building (above). A turret that originally graced the northwest corner of the building (near right) is being reconstructed and will soon have a new peaked roof (far right).

Photos by Sam Arendt

Construction crews are continuing to renovate and expand the former Grafton Hotel, a three-story building at 1312 Wisconsin Ave., under the direction of Mueller Hotel LLC.

The work is on schedule, with about 45% of the renovations completed and 35% of an addition done, said Paul Rushing, who is developing the project with partner Jim Read.

“It’s coming along very well,” Rushing said. “We’re excited about the progress and how things look.”

Constructed in the late 1800s, the Grafton Hotel building has been vacant since 2005. In 2009, the village’s Community Development Authority purchased the property and sold it to Mueller Hotel LLC as part of an agreement that calls for the structure to be converted to residential use.

In its new form, the building will house 20 apartment units, which will be located in the original 11,000-square-foot structure and a 6,700-square foot addition on the south end. An adjoining parking lot will have 33 spaces for tenants and guests.

Rushing said interior demolition work and cleaning of exterior brickwork are nearly finished. In addition to removing paint, crews are cleaning the bricks and restoring masonry.

The project is designed to restore the building to its original appearance when it opened as the Mueller Hotel, which will again become its name.

“It was a premier building when it was constructed, with high quality materials used. Everything is still very sound,” Rushing said.

Exterior restoration includes reconstructing the buildings's most distinctive architectural feature — a turret above the entrance on the northwest corner. The base of the turret is in place, with a peaked roof to be positioned by crane in the next few weeks, Rushing said.

"We're not sure exactly when the lift will be done, but it will be a big event," he said.

Work on the building is scheduled to continue into next year but "should be substantially done by the end of this year," Rushing said. The first tenants are expected in early 2012, he added.

Mueller Hotel LLC has not begun marketing the apartments but has received numerous inquiries, Rushing said.

"We're optimistic about attracting tenants. We've had a lot of people ask when the apartments will be ready," he said.

Although the project still has several months to go, the work has attracted daily attention, in large part because of the building's location and historical significance.

"Almost every day we've had people come by and look at what's happening," he said. "We've had older residents who remember what the building used to look like and little kids who are excited to see what it's going to be.

"It's very gratifying to see that kind of interest in the community."

Village officials have also voiced enthusiasm for the project, which is designed to help revitalize the downtown, increase property values and provide an eye-catching complement to the adjacent Paramount Plaza.

Under the development agreement, Mueller Hotel received a $360,000 development incentive from the village. In return, the firm must guarantee a minimum value of $1.6 million for the property.