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Redevelopment of Highland Building Begins

Ground Broken on Historic East Liberty Structure

Noah Brode April 16, 2012

Developers, politicians, and community leaders came together in East Liberty on Monday to break ground at the vacant Highland Building.

Walnut Capital wants to revamp the 102-year-old structure to house 110 apartments. Construction crews will also demolish the neighboring structure and install a parking garage to accommodate the building.

Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl said the redevelopment of the Highland Building and the nearby Wallace Building would "complete the comeback" of East Liberty.

He said the Highland Building project is one piece of a \$400 million investment into East Liberty.

"When these projects are complete, that will create nearly 2,400 jobs and \$17 million in tax revenue each year," said Ravenstahl. "So, when people question, 'Well, should the public be investing in these projects?' -- those numbers speak for themselves."

The mayor said a \$4.5 million state grant to build the parking garage was the most crucial factor in moving the project forward.

East Liberty Development Inc. Board President Pamela Collier said the Highland Building had been a prominent structure until about twenty years ago.

"It's been abandoned," said Collier. "It was, quite frankly, the poster child for urban blight and disinvestment in the neighborhood. What has happened is, we've had over half a dozen developers come, try to develop the building, and it just could not get off the ground."

Not only is the redevelopment bringing new housing opportunities to East Liberty, said Collier, but she thinks it's also symbolic of the neighborhood's revival.

For State Senator Jim Ferlo (D-Allegheny), one of the most positive aspects of the Highland Building project is the preservation of a National Historic Landmark more than a century old.

"Before we move quick to destroy, let's reinvent, let's re-envision, let's reinvigorate, because the bottom dollar will be enhanced, and the sustainability of our communities will be made even more real and appreciated," said Ferlo.

According to the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, the Highland Building is one of eleven buildings in Pittsburgh designed by turn-of-the-century architect D.H. Burnham. Seven of Burnham's buildings still stand.

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