

Downtown Fresno Droge Building set for demolition

By BoNhia Lee - The Fresno Bee

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The scary Droge Building in downtown Fresno, which looks like it might collapse if not for the iron props that have held it up for years, finally is coming down.

The Fresno Housing Authority plans to demolish the 91-year-old building, and a small building next door, on Monday to make way for a four-story apartment and commercial building aimed at young professionals.

It's a departure from the norm for the Housing Authority, which usually focuses on taking care of the poor or the homeless.

"We're really excited about providing housing options for working individuals in downtown," said Preston Prince, the authority's executive director. "If this brings some people downtown who then start supporting the restaurants and the retail, then we see this as a great milestone of downtown revitalization."

The \$11 million project on the corner of Van Ness Avenue and Inyo Street, one of downtown's busy entryways, will include 45 studio, one- and two-bedroom apartments, 24 ground-level parking stalls and 3,000 square feet of commercial space.



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The Droge building, with its exterior walls propped up by angled supports at the corner of Van Ness and Inyo Streets, will be razed and a mixed-use development created in its place as an entryway to downtown Fresno.

The goal is to provide affordable downtown living options for people who make \$28,000 to \$35,000 a year, Prince said.

Construction of the new 35,000-square-foot building is expected to be finished next summer.

The housing agency bought the Droge Building in 2010 after the city twice sued former owner Cliff Tutelian over the conditions of the 21,316-square-foot structure.

Tutelian, a developer, planned to renovate the building into shops, offices and housing. He got as far as hiring an architect, demolishing part of the roof and identifying structural issues that required engineering design.

The city of Fresno then suggested that Tutelian and the Housing Authority strike a deal. The authority bought the Tutelian property for \$350,000 and a small building next door for \$310,000.

But the authority also hit a snag. Piecing together money for the project was part of the problem, Prince said. The other half was figuring out whether to keep the existing structure or tear it down, he said.

The city's Historic Preservation Committee recommended the building be put on the local register of historic places. It was built in 1922 by Peter Droge, a member of a prominent and pioneering local fruit-packing family.

The building housed local government programs during the Great Depression, including the Works Progress Administration offices that helped put Valley residents to work in 1938.

It also was the site of the evacuation control station established in 1942 to register Japanese and Japanese-Americans for internment.

"There was certainly social history," said Karana Hattersley-Drayton, the city's historic preservation project manager. "Whether there was architectural history was a question."

The City Council decided last year that the site is a historic resource, but the building -- now boarded up with a collapsed roof and gutted interior -- no longer holds any historical significance.

Prince said it was too expensive to incorporate the shell of the building into the new design. The authority worked with a Sacramento architecture firm on a look that will fit in with other buildings in the area.

The building, which has yet to be named, will bring some life to a corner of downtown that is close to Chukchansi Park and businesses and restaurants on the Fulton Mall, said Elliot Balch, the city's downtown revitalization manager.

Maribel Anaya, whose family has owned and operated Joe's Steakhouse for eight years, is excited to finally see a residential project across the street from her business.

The steakhouse serves lunch on weekdays, but stays open for dinner only on Thursdays through Saturdays because so little traffic remains in downtown after dark.

A handful of developers have built lofts and townhomes in the Mural District on the north end of downtown, but few have ventured the other way.

"I think it's fabulous," Anaya said. "We don't really have much of a night life for people who stay downtown, so hopefully we'll get a little more evening business rather than closing up early."

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