

Proposed upper-floors incentive program has 'bucketloads of potential; Development Owners would be helped by councillor's plan to encourage renovations of uptown buildings

If the city offered cash to property owners who want to renovate the upper floors of buildings in the uptown, the people behind Revolution House would apply.

But they're not sure how quickly they would. "It would depend on the length of the form," joked Carolyn Bertin, the senior executive assistant of Revolution Strategy, the communications firm that recently moved into the 86 Prince William St. building.

Bertin and building co-owner Terri Riedle talked about upcoming renovations of the building's third floor and how they could be helped along if Coun. Bill Farren gets his way. Farren wants the city to provide incentives to people who renovate the uptown's unused upper floors.

Farren brought the suggestion forward during last week's common council meeting, where it was referred to city staff. Staff in turn will report back to council with a plan to be mulled over during 2007 budget deliberations.

Riedle, who is also with Revolution and co-owns the building with her husband Derek, says an incentives program would have "bucketloads of potential," especially since the historic buildings in the city's core can be difficult to renovate.

Riedle and Bertin spoke as they stood in the large third-floor space that will be made over in January. The room is a makeshift storeroom at the moment, with fluorescent lights, furniture and even a toilet strewn throughout the unlit room, which is painted a deep purple. The room's exposed beams and large, rounded-top windows offer the only hint that the space could soon be an attractive office for the growing company.

Renovating the 180-square-metre room will cost Riedle and her husband Derek between

\$150,000 and \$200,000. And while they plan to go ahead with the renovations regardless, Bertin said money from the city could speed up the process, in turn increasing the city's tax base more quickly.

Farren says he brought up the idea when he was campaigning for a council seat, and

during last year's budget deliberations. He likes the idea because it could potentially

increase the tax base without requiring the city to build any new infrastructure, such as power grids or water and sewerage infrastructure. "All we have to do to get a higher tax base out of these places is get (owners) to renovate it," he said.

The councillor believes fixing the upper floors makes the city more attractive as well. "If we help them renovate their inside, the outside will come along with it because they're going to want to attract tenants."

Farren brought up the idea again at last Monday's council meeting because of a presentation at a recent council session by Jim Baird, the city's commissioner of planning and development.

In that presentation, Baird attempted to show that the Heritage Development Board's grant for heritage projects should be raised from \$50,000 to \$150,000.

The grant allows improvements in heritage areas such as Trinity Royal to be subsidized 20 per cent by the city.

What caught Farren's eye was Baird's numbers showing that heritage properties increase in value far more than other properties in the city.

From 1981 to 1996, the tax base in heritage areas rose 127 per cent, compared to 85 per cent for the city-wide tax base.

Baird said in an interview his report on the upper floors will boil down to whether the city can get a good return on investment from helping developers.

It's not the first time the subject has come up. In 1991, the Preservation Review Board did a study on upper floors renovation. At the time, there were almost no buildings that had renovated their upper floors, and people largely saw it as something that was impossible, Baird said.

A grant program was put in place from 1992 to 1997 that helped pay for a design professional to take a look at an owner's space and tell

The Riedles would take any support they can get as they install a natural-gas fire boiler, a new roof, and all of the structural changes that will be required, such as lights, plumbing, and a new staircase that will come up through the floor. Incentives would only be positive for owners and Saint John in general, Riedle said. "It would be incredibly helpful."

them what needed to be done. Baird said only about 10 owners took advantage of the program in its five years, and few if any followed up with any actual renovations. Now with several buildings in the uptown using their top floors, such as CenterBeam Place, the question of "How to?" is no longer a mystery, Baird said.

Instead, any incentive program would likely help pay for an owner's capital costs. The Riedles, who renovated the second floor when Revolution Strategy first moved in, have plans to renovate the entire building.

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