

Panel backs art market project



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Image provided by Circa 1857An artist's rendering shows what Circa 1857 could look like after loft apartments, retail and community arts space are added.

BY CHAD CALDER

Advocate business writer

The owners of Circa 1857 are looking to add 30 loft apartments, retail and community arts space to the existing arts and antiques market on Government Street across from Park Boulevard.

The project is the second half of Circa owners Danny McGlynn and Dennis Hargroder's Mid-City Redevelopment Project. The first half is the planned renovation of the Darensbourg building across from Westmoreland Shopping Center and improving the streetscape of the block just east of Baton Rouge Magnet High School.

Circa's effort got a lift from the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority on Tuesday, when an RDA subcommittee officially recommended the agency allocate \$8.1 million in new markets tax credits to the \$11.1 million project.

The RDA's full board will consider the request at its meeting next month. If it grants it, the Mid-City Redevelopment Project will get the proceeds from the eventual sale of \$8.1 million in credits.

That amount will be less than \$8.1 million, and the rest will likely come from \$1 million in community development block grant funds through the state and one of two unnamed community development entities that Circa and the RDA are in discussions with, RDA Vice President Mark Goodson said.

"We feel very confident we'll be able to get that," Goodson told the RDA subcommittee's advisory board.

McGlynn told the group that the point of the project at Circa 1857 is to continue to stimulate the arts, culture and retail development by providing apartments for "starving artist" types who could use smaller spaces — 500 square feet to 1,200 square feet — to live and work.

He said just over half of the apartments would be restricted to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of low income, and that it would be modeled after recent arts-related redevelopment projects in New Orleans.

Advisory board members Rev. Raymond Jetson, Rodney Braxton and Verni Howard pressed McGlynn for commitments that the projects will employ people who live in surrounding neighborhoods and wouldn't use its target market of artists as a pretext to be exclusionary.

McGlynn said Circa provides work for several nearby residents now and if the project goes forward, "I'd like to think that would jump greatly." Similarly, he pledged to make sure apartments are available to neighborhood residents.

Kathy Thorpe, the curator of the BR Walls downtown mural project who will help guide the arts component of an expanded Circa 1857, told the board that having artists living at Circa will help it hold classes for local schoolchildren, and even eventually provide facilities, a kiln or darkroom, for example, for public use.

McGlynn said Circa is hoping the retail portion of the addition could be anchored by some kind of fresh-food market, which could help meet the need for healthy grocery options in Midcity.

McGlynn said the Darensbourg building-anchored portion of the project, known as the Model Block project, would account for about \$1.5 million of the total and include improvements to the sidewalk. That block is currently home to a tax-refund center, a tattoo parlor, Denicola's and Kerry Beary's Atomic Pop Shop. In addition to the overhaul of the Darensbourg building and relocation of Ritter Maher

Architects to the second floor and new retail on the ground floor, he said the center building will be taken down to add interior parking.

The idea is to create streetscape — bike racks, outdoor seating, landscaping — that can serve as an example to the rest of Government Street on how to move toward a more pedestrian-friendly experience.

McGlynn said the goal of the Mid-City Redevelopment Project in its entirety is to help continue to turn Government Street into an arts and culture destination.

“I would like to see Government Street become a Magazine Street, of sorts,” he said, noting the corridor already has significant arts and retail development.

Goodson told the advisory board the project satisfies the criteria for new market tax credits in a number of ways: more than 30 percent of the area’s residents are poor, median income is less than 60 percent and its unemployment rate is more than 1.5 times the average. He said that the project meets the criteria by offering 51 percent of its housing to people who make 80 percent of the average median income and couldn’t be financed using traditional methods, based on an estimate the project would only qualify for \$5.8 million in conventional financing.

Goodson said the project would provide 20 full-time jobs, 25 construction jobs and will help retain 80 jobs.

Jetson asked for assurances that the RDA will make sure the project meets the criteria of employing and providing housing options for the surrounding, predominantly black neighborhoods. Goodson said the RDA will do so, as it does for all of its tax credit projects.

The allocation marks the end of the RDA’s pool of new market tax credits. The credits recommended for Circa were originally planned to go toward River House, the renovation of the former Prince Murat Hotel, though that project has been held up waiting for a loan guarantee from HUD.

Goodson told the board that River House developers have been notified of plans to reallocate the tax credits and that they understand the RDA has to move on. He said the conversion of the Prince Murat to affordable housing is still a worthy project and the RDA will do what it can when the project does get moving.