

Out of the ashes

By Dan Whisenhunt

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Three years after it was gutted by fire, the building on the southeast corner of 10th and Noble streets remains mostly dark and broken, but signs of life are beginning to show through the cracks.

The old AmSouth building, known to many as "the 10 story building," has been mostly vacant since a late-night blaze in 2003 damaged the upper floors. Smoke from the fire and water from firefighters' hoses caused more damage throughout the structure.

With plans for renovations and new office tenants in the works, developers are starting to think a little bigger, hoping to restore the 1920s-era building to its former prominence in downtown professional life, and perhaps the lives of shoppers, as well.

Architects drawing up plans for the historic building's restoration hope to bring back at least one feature that vanished long ago — a shop-lined walkway linking Noble Street with the alley behind the tower.

Dean, Tyler and Burns architecture are redesigning the interior of the building. Their chief draftsman for the project, Karl Wasner, is holding down the fort by himself for now. His office is on the ground level and there are still no working elevators.

"I've got 10 floors to rattle around in," he said on Monday, thumbing through some blueprints. He's in his 70s and works alone 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Among his drawings are plans to restore the walkway, what planners are calling an arcade. It was in the original architecture but was absorbed by AmSouth's lobby at some point.

"It's amazing to think they had something like that so long ago," said Rodney Owens, the assistant general manager of Anniston Water Works and Sewer Board. The board bought the building in 2005 and sold it in February to Community Development Partners Inc., of Jonesboro, Ga.

Owens will be Community Development Partners' newest tenant, and Wasner's new neighbor in the near future. The Water Works and Sewer Board hopes to relocate to the basement and first and second floors by the spring or summer of 2007.

Construction could begin as early as the end of this summer, Owens said.

Above the alternating strips of black- and white-painted brick, the building still retains shadows of the



Karl Wasner, of Dean, Tyler and Burns architecture, looks over exterior plans for the AmSouth building on Noble Street. Photo: Stephen Gross/The Anniston Star

old AmSouth logo on a dark gray awning. A planned merger between Regions Bank and AmSouth will render that a relic.

In addition to restoring the old walkway, renovations also will include removal of the awning, Spirit of Anniston director Scott Barksdale said. The awning is sometimes referred to as the 11th floor, and was added by AmSouth in 1972, he said.

"The building will look as it did when it was originally built," he said.

Andrew Ham, a partner in Community Development Partners Inc, based out of Jonesboro Georgia, bought the building from the water board in February. He hopes to have it completely leased by 2007. Because the total cost of construction has not been determined he did not say what renting a space would cost.

"Until we finish all of our numbers and financing numbers, we won't be able to give a quote," Ham said. "But we will be competitive."

He estimated the total renovation could cost between \$5 million and \$6 million dollars.

Since the fire, all of the old inhabitants of the building have scattered and resumed life in other places.

Fred Lawton now practices law at 1520 Leighton Avenue. The fire that damaged the building started in his office on the 10th floor.

The cause of the blaze remains uncertain, Anniston Fire Chief Bill Fincher said.

"The fire just wiped us out and we haven't recovered," Lawton said. "We lost \$160,000 that night."

Lawton, a criminal defense attorney, said his clientele has changed with his address. His new neighbors are doctors and attorneys who do mostly civil work.

"I liked the view (at the AmSouth building)," Lawton said. "I could look out over the courthouse and see the jail. I felt closer to my clients that way."

The fire did more than smoke and water damage. When the tenants left, so did a sizeable chunk of patrons for downtown restaurants.

Lil' Cajun Cookery owner Steven Williams felt the pinch almost immediately. His restaurant is less than a block away on 10th Street.

"A lot of my regular patrons that frequented my business, you don't see them much anymore," Williams said. "All of the downtown restaurants were convenient to those folks."

Barksdale took a sunnier view on the fate of restaurants after the AmSouth building closed.

"There was possibly a bit of a gap there, but I don't think it's a great deal," he said. "When we lost the building it had a little bit of an impact for awhile, but we seem to have overcome that."

Another plus for attorneys doing business at the old AmSouth building was its proximity to the

courthouse, nearby on 11th Street.

"I think people expect their lawyers to be downtown," Lawton said.

As to whether or not he would move back to the building, Lawton said he wasn't sure. He said he was disappointed at the length of the renovation process and the wait to lease space there.

"I'd sign a contract if someone would give me one," he said.

Ham said the length of time it took to plan the rehab of the building is a reflection of the different parties involved.

"Because it is an historic rehab, it involves approval by the state government and national park service," Ham said.

Community Development Partners is waiting for the Water Works and Sewer Board to sign a lease agreement for its space in the building.

Owens said the building's history has posed special challenges.

"When we bought the building in 2005, we really had no notion of a timeframe," he said. "It's a lot easier when you're starting from scratch."

About Dan Whisenhunt

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