Another historical building lost to community

By HEATH DRUZIN
Advocate staff writer

Two Main Street buildings that stood for more than a century in downtown Baton Rouge were reduced to rubble in a matter of hours Sunday.

A backhoe began knocking down the buildings known as the Old Baton Rouge Ice Plant early Sunday morning to make way for a riverfront condominium project spearheaded by developer Richard Preis. The four adjacent one-story brick buildings, painted four different colors, are thought to date from the mid-to-late 1800s. The buildings sit between Lafayette Street and River Road.

The demolition of the vacant buildings took place over the objections of the Carolyn Bennet, executive director of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, who had earlier urged Preis to preserve the buildings.

"It's a wonderful example of what you had in Baton Rouge at that time," she said earlier this month.

Bennet has said that Preis' potential buyers would also want to see the buildings saved.

Preis said Sunday that he did all he could to save the buildings, including trying to buy other properties to compensate for the former Ice Plant.

In the end, though, the buildings had to go to allow for sufficient parking to serve the 150 units Preis said he expects to include in his $80 million project called One Riverplace Condominiums.

Preis, who had the dilapidated General Lafayette Inn torn down in September 2002 for the same project, criticized the Foundation for Historical Louisiana for inaction.

"The Historical Foundation is a great organization, but those buildings sat there undeveloped for 10 or 15 years," he said. "If they thought it was that important why didn't they buy them?"

Preis said he has already collected more than 25 deposits on the future condos and sees the development as an investment in downtown's revitalization.

"The major piece of the puzzle missing downtown are rooftops and we're building a vertical neighborhood," Preis said.

Davis Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District, said Sunday he is sad to see the buildings go, but excited about the new development.

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“It’s all part of the master plan for downtown Baton Rouge, to put people living in the Central Business District,” he said. “We see this as a major project, an important project for our future growth and prosperity.”

Rhorer added that the development fits into his long-term goal of creating a “dynamic and 24-hour downtown and Central Business District.”

Among the projects that are underway or ones that are planned for downtown are the following: the Shaw Center for the Arts, also known as the Arts Block; the expansion of the Riverside Centroplex; the renovation of the Capitol House Hotel into two hotels; the construction of the Iberville and Bienville state office buildings and planned loft apartments atop the Mayer, Jumonville, Fuqua and Thirsty Tiger Tavern buildings.

Meanwhile, Preis said he expects the demolition of the Old Ice Plant buildings to be completed by the middle of next week, weather permitting, with no road closures planned.

He said he hopes to begin construction on the condominiums in early spring 2004. He estimated the building could open by summer 2005.

The construction is not expected to impact the building housing The Thirsty Tiger Tavern, adjacent apartments and the so-called Florence Coffee House, which is on the National Register for Historic Places.