Dean plans to purchase, restore BR's historic Capitol House Hotel

BY ANNE PRICE
Advocate arts critic

Developer Bob Dean, already a heavy investor in downtown Baton Rouge, now plans to purchase and restore the Capitol House Hotel. "I have a purchase agreement, and I want to restore it as a 300-room hotel," he said.

He cited the historical importance of the building, which is listed on the National Register, as well as its significant riverfront location as key elements in the project.

"The historic value is unlimited," he said. "It was built in 1926 (as the Heidelberg Hotel) for a cost of $2 million. Huey Long stayed there, and John McKeithen had his transition offices there when he was elected governor."

A later addition included a ballroom, deck with swimming pool and more room space. Dean's plan would restore both sections.

Dean said his completion of the project is dependent on city, state and public support.

"I think I need the all-round support of the mayor and council. I want people behind me or I'd as soon not buy it," he said.

He estimated the total renovation cost at $12 million, much less than the probably $40 million cost of constructing a new hotel because the basic all-brick construction is sound.

Commissioner of Administration Mark Drennen said restoring the old hotel would coordinate with other downtown plans.

"It's a tremendous idea and it fits in real well with downtown and with the Capitol Complex," he said. "I'm excited and I hope he succeeds in purchasing the hotel and doing the renovation."

Davis Rhorer, executive director of Downtown Development District, cited the hotel's strategic location.

"We are very excited about the Capitol House having a new life downtown," he said. "It certainly is an icon in the community and one that is visually seen from the bridge. It's a fantastic location on the river and at the foot of Florida Boulevard."

"Bob (Dean) has worked wonders with many of the buildings downtown and we are so appreciative of that."

"I've put a lot of money and sweat equity into downtown," Dean said. "If I can make this happen I will. I've been looking at it (the hotel) for years and I think it's a key to what I do and a key to the state complex."

Dean has renovated the Belisle Building, Roumaine Building and State National Life Building on Third Street, the River Palms Apartments and Lakeshore Place by the governor's mansion and is in the process of restoring the City National Bank building. He also owns the old Gordon Jeweler's building and the old Rathskellar at the corner of Lafayette and Florida.

He said the lack of a downtown hotel inhibits retail business in the area and it makes sense to protect the "one we have," but he warned he will need support if he goes ahead with restoration.

"Downtown is like a railroad without a depot (without a hotel)," Dean said.

If he does undertake the project, Dean said the Hunt Room and two ballrooms would be restored and the 300-space parking garage would be retained and renovated so no land space would be used for hotel parking. The key to doing the project is public support, he added.

"This is not going to come together unless the whole community is behind me," he said. "That (the hotel) is the soul of Baton Rouge. If it's not done, it will be like the Paramount Theater and we're going to look back and be sorry."