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# Two Companies Compete for Lakeland Federal Building

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THE LEDGER

Published: Wednesday, November 25, 2009 at 7:52 p.m.

LAKELAND | A local credit union and restaurant are competing for the vacant Federal Building in downtown Lakeland.

The historic city-owned building at Tennessee Avenue and Lemon Street is nearly a century old and is coveted by Lakeland-based MidFlorida Credit Union and Arabellas Ristorante of Winter Haven.

Arabellas officials say they want to restore the property to its former grandeur and install a fine-dining restaurant, at an estimated cost of \$1 million. MidFlorida also wants to renovate the site as an eatery or meeting place, as well as tear down an addition to the building to create more parking for the adjacent MidFlorida Tower.

Both proposals are under review by a special committee of city officials. A decision is not expected until next month.

However, businessman Jerry Herring said he is concerned about MidFlorida's plan. Herring, a longtime commercial realtor who has owned and renovated several buildings downtown, doesn't like the idea of losing part of the Federal Building to a parking lot.

Working as a paid consultant for Arabellas, Herring has been trying to rally support for the restaurant's proposal and says it would keep the building intact while making it a viable business.

"It brings a five star restaurant downtown and a place for meetings," Herring said.



MICHAEL WILSON | THE LEDGER  
The old Federal Building at the corner of South Tennessee Avenue and East Lemon Street in downtown Lakeland.  
November 19, 2009.

"I think the real issue is whether the community will accept and should accept the destruction of a portion of the building."

The Federal Building, also known as the old Post Office, was constructed in 1917 and received the addition in 1929. It once housed local offices for the IRS and United States Department of Agriculture but has been vacant in recent years.

The federal government gave the building to the city in 2005 but still maintains some oversight over proposed changes. Though it is not on the National Register of Historic Places, Herring notes there are other downtown Lakeland buildings from the same era with that distinction.

City officials say the building, distinguished by its brick construction and white columns, has about 8,000 square feet that can be used for a new venture.

MidFlorida President Kevin Jones said the firm wants to refurbish the site and possibly lease it to a restaurant tenant, but he doesn't think Arrabellas would be a good fit. Jones said he envisions a small, lunch-focused eatery, whereas Arrabellas would need at least 5,000 square feet for a full-scale restaurant and bar.

Arrabellas also wants to have control over the property and leave the addition intact, which would be a dealbreaker for MidFlorida.

"We want to enhance the corner and enhance the parking area we have over there. We don't feel like a restaurant and bar at the site would really be conducive, because there's no other restaurants or retail in the area," Jones said.

Tony Delgado, Lakeland's deputy city manager, said both proposals are being reviewed by a committee of officials from city government and the Historic Lakeland Inc. group.

Delgado said he doesn't expect a decision until December, but no matter who gets the nod, he said the Federal Building will ultimately benefit from a facelift and new tenants.

"Obviously this building has a lot of historic relevance to the city, but it's also in the downtown corridor where we want to see some good development take place," Delgado said. "We're excited. We think we have two very good proposals."

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