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Thibeault of Joseph Properties proposes art center after purchasing 40 Thorndike St., Concord, NH, for \$425,000

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In the natural light beaming through large windows into the empty classrooms at the Rumford School, Brian Thibeault saw opportunity. Thibeault, owner of Manchester-based Joseph Properties, jumped at the chance and entered into a sales agreement with the Concord School District to buy the building at 40 Thorndike St. for \$425,000. He has proposed a community arts center mirroring his successful Pawtucket Armory Arts Center in R.I. He will present his plans to the school board's capital facilities committee.

Optimism about the plan is tempered only by the remaining due diligence before the deal is finalized.

"We want it to be a whole community center," Thibeault said. "Our intention is to have a wide range of community-type arts in there. The more we talk about it, the more we hear there is a real need for the space."

Thibeault envisions a center where dance and ballet classes have space to meet, artists and photographers can exhibit their work and members of the community can convene for meetings and events.

"We want the artists to tell us what they want to see," he said. "Each room is going to be a little different. Basically, we're going to give them a blank canvas to work with and they can go from there."

Thibeault's offer comes less than a year after Christ the King Parish rescinded its \$600,000 offer to buy the 25,000 s/f building on nearly an acre and a half. A final sale is contingent upon a building and environmental inspection, and a satisfactory discussion about how the property will be assessed in the future.

During discussions with Christ the King, board members voiced a desire to have a tenant that was not tax-exempt. The building was assessed at \$2.5 million in 2013, according to property records. Thibeault will also need a variance from the zoning board to use the property as a for-profit arts center.

"It's nowhere near a done deal, but we're working through the process," said Jack Dunn, business administrator for the school district. "Obviously, it's exciting that we could see the building go into active reuse, and that's been the board's goal, to get the schools into active reuse as soon as possible while being mindful of what the use of the building will be."

Dunn said the process will be the same as when Binnie Media agreed to buy the Walker School. The district put several schools on the market after consolidating elementary schools. The Dame School was transferred to the city for use as a community center, and the Eastman School is not currently for sale.

"There is some excitement about it. The board is anxious to hear more," Dunn said. "It looks like an

exciting opportunity."

Thibeault acquired several properties in Concord last year on Chenelle and South Main Sts. and Loudon Rd. Soon after, he started hearing from members of the arts community. He fielded calls from dance and theater instructors and artists looking for space. The inquiries piqued his interest, but Thibeault's buildings weren't suitable for such uses. The plan for the arts center came after a meeting with Premiere Properties' Scott Walker, who mentioned the old school, built in 1903.

"It made me think about where I could put space for artists. Basically, a light bulb went off, and we said we could do the same thing here that we did in Pawtucket," Thibeault said.

In Pawtucket a major tenant had moved out, and the building's owners were facing bankruptcy. Thibeault, who specializes in historic restoration, heard about the situation and offered more than \$500,000 for the castlelike brick building north of Providence, R.I. He spent thousands more renovating the interior of the 48,000 s/f building.

The Pawtucket Armory Arts Center is now a bustling hub that houses dance classes, artist space, and event space for banquets and art installations. Permanent tenants include a tango class, a ballet studio for children, a world dance music center, photography studios and the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theater.

"If you walk into the armory, it's buzzing. We basically rescued that building," Thibeault said.

The centerpiece of the project was the renovation of the 11,000-square-foot drill hall that is now used for charity events, galas, craft shows, markets, weddings and other events.

While the Rumford School project would be on a smaller scale, Thibeault said the success of the Rhode Island armory gives him a blueprint for Concord.

"Especially for the more commercial, profitable arts, I think it would fill a niche," said Ryan Linehan, executive director at the Kimball-Jenkins Estate and School of Art, which offers classes and workshops in traditional visual arts like painting, pottery, photography and sculpture. Kimball-Jenkins also rents seven private artists' studios, which are occupied mostly by artists who earn a living from their work.

"There are a lot of people in Concord who might want a studio space, but the number of them that can dedicate a certain amount of money per month every month is small," Linehan said.

What Kimball-Jenkins may not be able to offer - small office spaces for wedding photographers or graphic designers looking for more space - a new arts center potentially could. "I think what they are going to find is they are going to have a very mixed-use space," Linehan said.

Developing incubator space for artists and creative enterprise has been identified as a need in Concord, said Tim Sink, president of the Greater Concord Chamber of Commerce. "We're very excited about the proposal. We encourage this type of development in Concord as a way of growing the creative economy," Sink said. "It's not exactly what we had in mind in terms of an incubator, but it fills a very similar need."

Artist responses to surveys distributed by the chamber's Creative Concord Committee indicate there is demand for this type of space, Sink said, and the committee is actively working to study and grow the creative economy in the region, along with creating a long-range plan to maximize the artist culture in the region.

"To attract and retain a happy and educated work force, we need to have a strong arts and cultural community," he said.