

Renovation: \$600,000 Project Reviving Montrose

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The Phoenix of Montrose Court has begun to rise.

The historic, almost legendary structure in the Southwest neighborhood will become a 28-unit apartment building by mid-November, revived by a \$600,000 renovation.

Sam Pickering, the developer, promises that Montrose will be the new high-rent address in Johnson City.

Sitting in an office waiting to be swept clean of the ashes of Montrose's recovery, dirt that had gathered for more than 60 years behind the now-gone plaster and lathe, Pickering said, "Every city has K-Marts and McDonald's. A place like this makes a town unique. This says you live in Johnson City and nowhere else."

While some condominium owners in town pay \$600 to \$700 a month for their living quarters, rent at Montrose will be high for an apartment project. The one- and two-bedroom apartments will have rental fees of from \$375 to \$440 a month.

"I don't think there's going to be any problem renting the units," Pickering said. "There' have been so many people interested in it."

Among the interested onlookers have been Montrose's neighbors. Dismayed that the building has been vacant for nearly five years, they have been won over. They have already christened the project with a Sunday afternoon volleyball game.

"They're just tickled to death that work has started and will move ahead swiftly," Pickering said. He and his financial partners bought the building in 1981, but interest rates prevented work from starting. "I was taking a lot of heat for not moving on the project. It's unrealistic for anybody to do construction at 16 to 17 percent interest."

"I waited so long for construction money, and I got it. I got a prime loan from First Tennessee Bank. At \$6,000 a point, you can do a lot with that."

Pickering has plans to do a lot. Standing in the old "tea room," he described the wet bar, refrigerator, stove, parquet flooring, woodwork,

fireplace, old photographs of Montrose for the walls, and the French doors leading out to the landscaped garden in the rear courtyard, restored under a canvas awning.

The tea room will be a common-use area for the tenants. “This will be a room at their disposal for social events, receptions, bridge clubs, whatever.”

“This will be my pride and joy,” Pickering said.



Developer Sam Pickering in a Montrose hallway

The lobby will be redone with inset mailboxes, a slate or marble floor, and a large chandelier.

A new elevator will be installed in one of Montrose’s two existing elevator shafts. The front door will be secured with an intercom lock.

Pickering went to 15 woodworking shops before finding Bailey’s shop in Chuckey. The millworker has the “old-time shapers for the joiners,” needed to restore Montrose’s oak baseboard, wainscot and chair rails.

Pickering has restored townhouses in Washington, D.C. While he has directed large projects, Montrose is his largest. The building is also in the best condition of any he has worked on.

Still, “it’s a gut job. There is no sense patching this kind of job. Otherwise you got maintenance headaches.”

Salvage brass and copper and scrap galvanized pipe are piled in various corners around the building. All air ducts, plumbing and electrical wiring and connections will be new. Separate heat pumps for each apartment will be mounted on the flat roof in the rear.

Although much work is being done inside, most of the work will be on the exterior – restoring Montrose’s Tudor and stucco face, re-glazing the windows and repairing and painting the trim. The brick will be cleaned with a chemical approved for use on historic landmarks. Scaffolding will sit around the building for the next three months.

The slate roof will remain but needs to be repaired. The rear roof will be rebuilt.

Montrose’s seven skylights will be cleaned and restored as well as the glass floors below them that allow the light to shine through three stories. One third-floor apartment will have a skylight in the living room. Another will have a skylight in the master bedroom. One apartment will have an octagonal living room.

The apartments will be averaging 1,000 square feet “about the size of a new house that they build today,” Pickering said. Each apartment will have a sun porch, some enclosed, and others screened.

Pickering is hoping to furnish a few of the units and lease them to area corporations who regularly have visiting executives. “The apartments will have all the conveniences, with the addition of the nostalgia and a majestic building.”

The project’s timing has been good. Pickering said suppliers are hungry and anxious to bring the recovery their way. He has not had trouble finding experienced carpenters for his 15-man crew.

Touring the building from the ground up, Pickering pointed out one crew jacking up the joists and building additional block columns in the basement. “You’re looking at \$42 an hour there, but it is delicate work to level the floors.”

“The original columns were just a little too far apart, but they didn’t know buildings were going to last 60 years back then.”

