

Friends record a save

Grass-roots group toils for four years to preserve the Ziock Building

By Brian Leaf
Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD — April Fool's Day 2010 was dead-serious for Don Bissell.

The newspaper came and he read the city's proposed solution to what officials saw as 13 stories of skyline blight.

"Pissed me off," said the retired Sundstrand Corp. project manager.

The Ziock Building, the city's first skyscraper, was targeted for demolition. After razing, its remains would be ground to rubble and recycled as footings for the Morgan Street Bridge.

Bissell called some friends and they acted quickly.

By the time the building was aglow in Joe Marino's Fourth of July fireworks three months later, Bissell and the Friends of Ziock had obtained a stay of execution for the 102-year-old factory.

And four years later, the Friends of Ziock was in the Rockford City Council chambers when aldermen Monday approved a \$52.7 million development deal with Gorman & Co. to turn Ziock into a hotel-convention center.

"We cheered, then we left," said Marge Bevers, Bissell's neighbor and a founding member of the Friends of Ziock.



Members of Friends of Ziock — attorney Mike Schirger (from left), Marge Bevers, Don Bissell and Gary Anderson — photographed Tuesday at West State and Wyman streets in Rockford, with the building in the background. BRENT LEWIS/RRSTAR.COM

The group, now 100 members strong, overcame financial and political odds, fighting City Hall and then winning back the support of its alderman.

"Through their advocacy, they certainly helped bring the project along," said City Administrator Jim Ryan.

They also helped change public perception of Ziock from urban white elephant to civic white knight, leading downtown's renaissance.

"It's always been about business and getting this building back on the tax rolls," Bissell said

The Ziock Building, 416 S. Main St., also known

as the Amerock Building, was built in 1912. Its size and high-rise design made it the most visible industrial building in the city. It was a riverfront monument to the city's sock and knitting industry, which Friends of Ziock research discovered had employed

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Don Bissell, member, Friends of Ziock

SAVE

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3,000 people at five factories at the dawn of the 20th century.

When the knitting business faded, metal fabricating rose.

And in 1946 a company that would become Amerock, which made metal hardware for cabinets and furniture, took over the building until the early 1990s, when it was vacated and became one more industrial carcass in a town already full of them.

And there it sat. Plenty of ideas to renovate the building were pitched in subsequent years, but none of those plans advanced and the building grew shabby. What didn't deteriorate was the building's structure, which is still solid, and a rooftop that provides stunning views of the Rock River and the city.

The city bought the building in 2010.

As it prepared to raze it, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency got a letter signed by Bissell with several pages of attachments making a case to save it. The agency had given the city permission to tear down the building, but after getting the letter reversed its decision.

Fixing old buildings takes vision and money. Bissell and Marge and Kyle Bevers knew that firsthand. They had spent 6,800 hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars turning the 140-year-old Richardson Building at West State and Wyman streets into luxury loft apartments downtown.

"It was horrible," Marge Bevers said. "But you can fix anything if you put your mind to it."

Friends of Ziock began to market the building, which qualified for national historic tax credits to pay for up to 20 percent of construction costs.

They sought redevelopment proposals.

"We put together a list of 20 to 25 developers that did big historic projects," said architect Gary Anderson, who specializes in planning renovations for historic buildings.

Their mailings generated some nibbles. But it wasn't until 2011, when Illinois included Rockford in the 25 percent Rivers Edge Historic Tax Credit program, that interest grew among redevelopment specialists from Boston, Minneapolis, Kansas City and other cities.

A half-dozen companies from outside the region are still interested in renovating some of the 225 properties in the city that qualify for the tax credits.

"The math changed with the state credits," said local attorney Mike Schirger.

So, too, did political support.

Gorman & Co. of Oregon, Wis., was one

of the interested companies, and it already had a presence here. Gorman was the developer of Jane Addams Park at College and Seminary streets for the Rockford Housing Authority. It also manages Brewington Oaks, two residential towers with 418 units near the Morgan Street bridge.

"The thing that really clicked with us, in addition to their experience with tax credits, was their EB-5 experience," said Kyle Bevers.

EB-5 is a federal immigration program that grants foreign investors a visa if they invest \$500,000 in a project that creates 10 jobs. Gorman had used the program elsewhere. Bevers said it's tough for companies to get bank loans for redevelopment downtown because property values are so low. Between tax credits and EB-5, Bevers said, Gorman wouldn't need a bank to finance the project.

Gorman hired a consultant to assess the market for a downtown hotel.

"He came back with a conclusion that was not just 'no' but was 'hell no,'" Bissell said.

The Friends of Ziock decided to do its own research, calling 75 Rockford companies to assess how many room nights their businesses might need each year.

Bissell said the numbers showed that demand was for up to 29,000 room nights for a hotel downtown, and that demand was there for meeting space, too. More room nights would come from the Reclaiming First indoor sports center across the river, which expects to draw hundreds of people for 30 weekend tournaments that it would host.

Gorman decided it was feasible for a 150-room hotel with a 20,000-square-foot convention center.

It was good news, but strong political backing was still needed. Friends of Ziock members were among those who called aldermen the past several weeks, urging support for the project. In the end, aldermen voted 13-1 to approve a development agreement that will include an investment by the city of \$18.6 million for parking and infrastructure.

Now that the building project is advancing, Friends of Ziock say their work continues. They plan to keep watch over the Ziock project and look for other historic projects to get behind.

Anderson is convinced there will be more projects.

"We're still tracking contractors," Anderson said. "There are six who have come to town and toured buildings."

"One has been back three times."

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A document designating the Ziock/Ameriock Building's addition to the National Register of Historic Places on display during a party June 9, 2011, at the Prairie Street Brewhouse in Rockford. RRSTAR.COM FILE PHOTO