

Possibilities 'unlimited' for Michigan City's historic Masonic Temple

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MICHIGAN CITY — A developer known for historic preservation projects hopes to breathe new life into the historic former Masonic Temple in downtown Michigan City, likely eventually turning it into a European-style boutique hotel.

"The potential is unlimited," said developer Rob Harte with the NWI Development Group.

Acme Lodge No. 83 built the brick, three-story Masonic Temple at 132 E. 6th St. in 1922. The walls of the 20,172-square-foot building were 83 feet by 83 feet in a nod to the lodge's number.

Like other fraternal organizations, the Masons saw membership decline and moved to a smaller building that was less costly to maintain at 8700 W. Pahs Road in 2000. The building was converted into a halfway house for federal prisoners.

It was recently acquired by NWI Development Group, which opened it to the public for the first time in decades at an open house Thursday meant to showcase redevelopment opportunities.

"My grandfather and father were Masons, and I was a Mason. I never thought I would have the opportunity to come into this building and see this," Brad Hill said. "Some of the seats I'm sure my father and grandfather sat in back in the day, as did business and community leaders. This was a hub of activity that was enriching the community. We're grateful to have the opportunity to see all this, and I'm sure the building is in good hands."

For decades, the Masonic Temple used to host dances, socials and other formal events. Many people in Michigan City met future spouses there.

"I got into dancing and partying downstairs before I knew anything about it being a Masonic Lodge," Mason Joe Dabkowski said.

"Masonic brothers built this for their lodge rooms. It's a very well-built building. Your exterior walls on this building are 22 inches. It's that

thick. It was used more for just masonic activities. It had a lot of banquets and dinners and other events."

NWI Development Group is now looking for tenants to move into the space as it looks to adaptively reuse it. Team O'Connor Jiu Jitsu Academy of Chesterton and a ghost kitchen operator have expressed interest. The developer is touting potential uses like offices, gyms, fitness studios, yoga studios, restaurants and ghost kitchens.

The century-old building has been rebranded as The Cornerstone.

"The inspiration was that this was the cornerstone of social activity for many years. For a long time, it was a social hall. It was just the cornerstone of activity," Harte said. "What we really loved about the building was the stature of the facade in 1922. We love it as just a visual historic gem in Michigan City. We need to find a way to adapt the inside for modern use. A lot of inside has been reconfigured already because of the transfer from the masonic use to the most recent use as a halfway house."

Valparaiso-based Prisoners and Community Together helped federal inmates from across the country transition back into society. About 75 inmates at a time served out the end of their incarceration in dormitories there.

"I've always admired the building. I would drive by and say, 'That's a great building,'" Harte said. "It just popped up on MLS one day, and I said, 'My God, this building is available.' I put an offer (in) the morning it went on the market. We ended up getting the building. Then we came inside and started figuring out what we want to do with it."

The front half of the building, which includes the event space for the Masons, was in good shape. It, for instance, still has wooden folding chairs in the auditorium where the Masons gathered and that PACT used as a classroom until the halfway house program ended.

NWI Development Group did some light interior renovations, including painting and new carpets, to get it ready for tenants.

"This is a great building. This is unbelievable," Harte said. "This was a social hub for the whole time it was a Masonic Temple. It feels it needs to be that again."

NWI Development Group has redeveloped many other historic properties across Northwest Indiana in recent years. It transformed the former Bank Calumet headquarters into the 100-unit The Banc apartment complex and a vacant 1871-era warehouse into Barrelhouse The Venue, a wedding venue outside Zorn Brewing in Michigan City.

"First, we want to activate the building again and get these spaces filled," Harte said.

Tenants will be able to occupy the building for a few years and will be given a significant amount of advance notice before NWI Development Group moves forward with its long-term plans to turn it into a boutique hotel with a restaurant and rooftop bar. NWI Development Group would help place tenants in new homes when the time comes to embark on a multi-million-dollar redevelopment project.

"It feels like a European hotel when you first walk in. It feels like that kind of thing," Harte said. "Ultimately, we want to do that type of thing."

It would likely have 25 rooms and rooftop views of Lake Michigan and the shoreline.

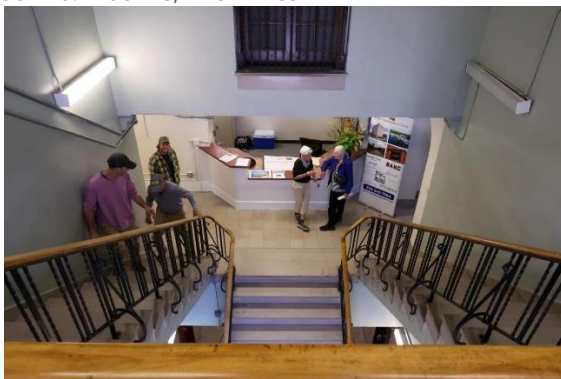
"That's our longtime goal," he said. "As the market evolves, I'll be working on a plan to turn this into a boutique hotel."

PHOTOS: Open house of former Masonic Temple, now known as The Cornerstone



Carla Suson chats with Don Babcock, left, and Joe Coar at The Cornerstone, formerly the Masonic Temple. Her business, Flying Unicorns, is the first tenant at The Cornerstone. She makes 3-D printed items.

John J. Watkins, The Times



The Cornerstone, formerly the Masonic Temple, is ready for tenants.

John J. Watkins, The Times



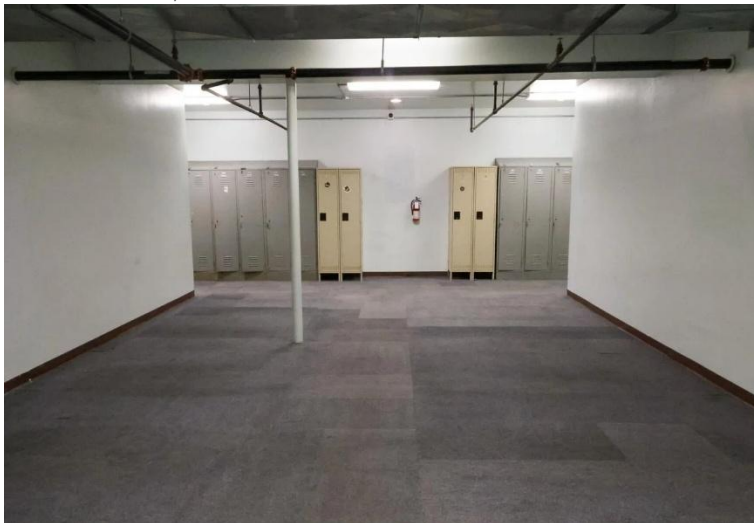
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Some seats remain from the from what was once the theater at The Cornerstone, formerly the Masonic Temple.

John J. Watkins, The Times



This area was formerly part of a dorm room at The Cornerstone, formerly the Masonic Temple.

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This is the original Masonic safe at The Cornerstone, formerly the Masonic Temple.

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Tera O'Connor runs some of her students through some martial arts exercises at The Cornerstone, formerly the Masonic Temple.

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Sharon Harte, Executive Vice-President of NWI Development, and Michigan City Mayor Angie Nelson Deutch cut the ribbon at The Cornerstone, formerly the Masonic Temple.

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