

CONNECTICUT NEWS

High-End Condos A Lofty Ambition

Office Tower Owner Plans 50-60 Units

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By JEFFREY B. COHEN, Courant Staff Writer

The man who bought the Bank of America building on Main Street in Hartford wants to turn several of the office tower's upper floors into high-rise condominium units - with sweeping city vistas and river views that could help push the price as high as \$300,000 or \$400,000.

And he's not shy about it.

"It beats out anything that Hartford 21 has because Hartford 21 has my building in front of it," Michael Grunberg said Friday, standing on the terrace of what used to be a 26th-floor corporate dining room.

Hartford 21 is the 36-story, 262-apartment rental tower of Northland Investment Corp. scheduled to officially open Sept. 1. It is, as Grunberg sees it, his competition, but he thinks those interested in moving downtown would prefer to buy.

Grunberg, of the Manhattan firm Grunberg Realty, said he wants to spend \$10 million to \$15 million to convert the upper floors of the office building at 777 Main St. into 50 to 60 condos. Some units would be as small as 1,260 square feet, but Grunberg envisions building 10 or so penthouses with more than twice that much space.

"It might be a good proposal," said John F. Palmieri, the city's director of development services. "That type of development program would be consistent with the housing environment we're trying to create downtown."

In a market brimming with new or recently opened rental units, Grunberg sees a need for ownership. The list includes 262 units soon at Hartford 21; 132 units open at the old SNET building at Trumbull and Jewell streets; 100 units at Trumbull on the Park; 78 units under construction at the Sage-Allen project on Main Street; 238 units in various stages of construction at the Colt Gateway complex; and 100 units planned at the site of the old YMCA building on Bushnell Park.

"Every single person that is renting in Hartford is my market because they would all prefer to be owners if given the opportunity," he said. Rates in the city's new rental units are so high, he said, that "people are going to be able buy units of comparable size for the amount they're paying in rent."

To help research his theory, Grunberg is renting an apartment at Hartford 21. "I wanted to see the best that Hartford has so that I could obviously beat it," he said.

But Grunberg is not the only one talking about building condos downtown. In addition to the 50 units coming onto the market at the Metropolitan on Pearl Street, there are 33 luxury units planned for 101 Pearl St.; 89 condos at the old American Airlines building on Main Street; 100 units under design at the old Capewell Horse Nail Co. factory; and 200 more units to join the apartments at the old YMCA building.

John M. Clapp, a professor of real estate at the University of Connecticut, said the continued viability of the Hartford market to absorb all these new units depends, in part, on the size of the suburban empty-nester market.

"The back-to-downtown movement is fundamentally limited," Clapp said. "It doesn't mean it's not there, and certainly they're riding on a whole lot of good things happening in downtown Hartford. But it's really a question of how big the market is, and it's certainly not huge."

"At some point," he said, "they'll reach saturation."

To accomplish his goal, Grunberg needs two things. First, Bank of America, which now occupies the bottom 14 floors and four upper floors of the tower across from the Old State House, would have to consolidate its operations into the building's lower floors. A bank spokesman said the matter is still under discussion.

Second, Grunberg said he needs to get \$2 million in parking assistance from the state's Capital City Economic Development Authority to expand a nearby parking garage he already owns to accommodate the need for condo residents.

The \$2 million, he said, is the project's "Achilles' heel."

Grunberg formally presented his request to the authority Thursday. He's not ruling out the project if he doesn't get state money, but he's not making any promises, either.

Except, of course, the ones about the views.

The worst view, Grunberg concedes from the 26th floor, is the southern one - where residents can see their reflections in the Gold Building across the street.

The western side of the building has views of Bushnell Park, the state Capitol, Hartford 21 and the western suburbs. To the northern view is the Sage-Allen project and the winding upstream stretch of the Connecticut River.

But it's the eastern view, taking in the full sweep of the river, that Grunberg boasts about.

"This view at night is outstanding," he said.

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MICHAEL GRUNBERG shows off the view on the 26th floor of the Bank of America building in Hartford. Seeing a market for buyers, he is proposing upper-story condos. (RICK HARTFORD)

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