

# Architectural firm plans a \$4-million-plus rehab project to a downtown building

## Architecture firm's \$4M Wells rehab project awaits appraisal, financing

By [David Skolnick](#)

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Photo by: Robert K. Yosay

Kirk E. Kreuzwieser, vice president of Strollo Architects, says much of the interior of the 96-year-old Wells Building needs to be gutted. He and Gregg Strollo, company president, believe the \$4 million-plus rehabilitation project could be completed in less than nine months after financial issues are resolved.



Photo by: VINDICATOR FILE PHOTO, 2010

The Wells Building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. It was last used about 30 years ago as an Armed Forces recruiting facility.

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YOUNGSTOWN

Strollo Architects is ready to start a \$4 million- plus rehabilitation project of the long-vacant Wells Building to turn it into the company's new headquarters with 12 apartments on its upper three floors.

But the work won't happen unless the company gets a "reasonable" appraisal on the downtown property at 201 W. Federal St.; obtains financing for the project, which largely rests with the appraisal; and is able to meet and afford the requirements of state and federal agencies, which will provide \$1.8 million in tax credits once the project is completed, said Gregg Strollo, the company's president and principal.

"We're looking at what we can afford and finance," he said. "If the appraisal doesn't work for the project, we may appeal to the state to make changes" to reduce the cost.

The architectural firm should have answers to all of those concerns in the next 30 days, Strollo said.

He called the state and federal restrictions "tough, but doable."

Without the state and federal funds, the project won't happen, Strollo said. Work on the project must begin by August or the tax credits can't be used, he said.

The Ohio Historic Preservation Office and the U.S. Department of the Interior's National Park Service oversee the state and federal tax credits, respectively. The state is offering \$1 million, and the federal tax credit is \$800,000.

Strollo and Kirk E. Kreuzwieser, the company's vice president and principal, say they are confident everything will work out, and once it starts, the project will be finished in less than nine months.

The 96-year-old building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986 and features white-glazed terra cotta, swags, urns and vases on its exterior. It was last used about 30 years ago as an Armed Forces recruiting facility — a couple of its basement windows still have recruiting posters.

If the firm doesn't move into the Wells Building, the historic building will be demolished, Strollo and Kreuzwieser said.

"This project is job retention, job creation, downtown revitalization — it stabilizes a delinquent property that would otherwise be demolished," Strollo said. "Everyone has been reasonable, but we need to get it formalized and approved."

"We could stabilize the building for a lot less money, but it would be architecturally unsympathetic to the history of the Wells Building and the central business district," Kreuzwieser said.

The company is in preliminary discussions with the city about economic development assistance for the project.

The firm employs 20 and expects to increase that number when it relocates to the Wells Building, Strollo said.

The Ohio Historic Preservation Office, following the federal interior guidelines, wants five specific aspects of the Wells rehabilitation project to be included before the state and federal tax credits are used, Strollo and Kreuzwieser said.

Three interior issues are retaining and restoring a rear staircase from the basement to the first floor, the metal

ceilings on the first and second floors and a portion of the basement, and five metal columns on the first and second floors, and six in the basement.

Those all can be done without much trouble, Kreuzwieser said.

Much of the building's interior needs to be gutted, and some of the windows, including the main front one on the second floor with 10 bullet holes shot from inside the structure, will need to be replaced.

The two exterior requirements are the rehabilitation of the terra cotta, which is doable, and the windows, which could be costly as there are more than 100 of them, Kreuzwieser said.

"The windows are a concern," he said. "A point of contention is how much is salvageable."

The state wants the window frames to be made of wood, which gets expensive, Kreuzwieser said. The firm will ask the state if metal, which is less expensive, can be used on the fourth-floor windows as long as those frames look enough like the windows did nearly 100 years ago from the exterior, he said.

The project has changed significantly since the Ohio Department of Development announced in July 2011 that the building would receive tax credits.

The project originally was designed to be part of the Youngstown/Warren Regional Chamber's Youngstown World Trade Center. That center was to be built just west of Wells at the site of the Armed Forces Building and State Theater, both demolished about five years ago. All that's left at that location is a very large hole where the Armed Forces Building once stood and the theater's historic facade.

The Youngstown Central Area Community Improvement Corp., a nonprofit downtown property development organization managed by the chamber, owns the Wells Building. Strollo said his firm has an option of about \$85,000 to buy the building.

Strollo's plan was to turn the four-story plus basement structure into the company's office, currently located in the city-owned 20 Federal Place, as well as additional office space, with a portion of the building for the trade center, and retail on the ground floor.

But with the chamber's World Trade Center idea not moving forward, Strollo made major changes to the company's plan for the nearly 30,000-square-foot structure.

The firm will use the first floor for its office, including building a mezzanine area for additional workspace, and a portion of the basement for storage. The upper three floors will be converted into apartments, four on each floor. The apartments would range from studios to two bedrooms and be between 900 and 1,255 square feet each. Each unit would have storage space in the basement.

"With the absence of the World Trade Center, we had to revisit the plans," Strollo said. "The center thought their space needs would put demand on space at our building. Without the center, we made changes. The demand for residential space is apparently there. We'd specifically market it to young professionals."

The state needs to approve the use change, which Strollo and Kreuzwieser don't anticipate being a problem.

Upper-scale downtown housing has done well in Youngstown, but Strollo said, "We're taking a pretty big risk."

We don't have any spaces leased. We think they should rent themselves, but there's no guarantee."

Kreuzwieser said the firm wants "to be part of the revitalization of Youngstown, save an historic building and provide jobs."

Monthly rental fees haven't been determined, but Stollo said they'd be competitive with other downtown apartment units.

Also, B&B Contractors & Developers, the project's main contractor, will form a holding company with the architectural firm to run and manage the building if it is built, Stollo said.