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Downtown church transforms

Part of revitalization, says owner

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SOUTHBRIDGE — With scrapers, paintbrushes, hammers and nails, the former Universalist church on the corner of Main and Hamilton streets is transforming into a multi-use building that will eventually house a museum, a tourist information center, apartments and offices.

Yesterday, co-owner and developer of the site, Gabriel McCarthy, talked about plans for the building.

"Main Street is like a mouth with empty teeth," McCarthy said.

The restoration of the church, as well as other buildings in the area, will help to fill in the gaps, he said.

The building, which currently houses two church organizations, is in reasonably good shape, McCarthy said. On the outside, the church will receive new paint, doors and eventually new stained glass windows and a new spire.



Courtesy photo

An historical photograph of the Universalist Church on the corner of Main and Hamilton streets shows the church in 1842 before the building's steeple was destroyed in 1938. (*click for larger version*)



Shawn Kelley photo
Gabriel McCarthy, of
Southbridge, talks
yesterday about plans
for the renovation of

the old Universalist Church on the corner of Hamilton and Main streets. (*click for larger version*)

"We're trying to get the outside of the building as close to the original as possible," McCarthy said.

Inside, the building will be completely upgraded.

The First Universalist Society of Southbridge built the original church in 1842. In 1938, the church lost its spire in a hurricane.

Today, the church houses two Spanish church groups. At least one of the groups will move to a new location, McCarthy said.

One of the new tenants of the building will be Richard Whitney, a former employee of American Optical and current global standards manager of Carl Zeiss Vision.

Whitney is the curator of the American Optical Heritage Museum originally founded by John Young. The collection includes optical goods and artifacts pertaining to the history of American Optical, including over 3,000 antique spectacle frames.

Whitney said yesterday that he is excited about finally having a home for the museum. The museum was originally housed at the American Optical building, but in 2000, it moved into storage when the Southbridge Hotel and Conference Center was built.

"This happened fast in terms of development," he said. "There's a lot to be done."

Whitney said several local businesses, including his employer Carl Zeiss, have been very supportive of the museum. He imagines that in the future, the museum might include other types of exhibits of local businesses.

The building is interesting, he added, because it made the Historic Massachusetts organizations' top 10 list of endangered historical resources in 2001.

"It's an endangered building. You don't want it to be a parking lot," Whitney said.

Both Whitney and McCarthy said the new building is just one example of the town's resurgence.

"I think this town has enormous potential," McCarthy said. "It has great infrastructure."

"I think it will be a shot in the arm," Whitney said. "I see a resurgence ... It's slower than some people would like. It's not just one thing, and there's not just one answer."

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"I think this town has enormous potential. It has great infrastructure." — Gabriel McCarthy, co-owner of former Universalist Church on Main Street, on the rejuvenation of downtown Southbridge.