

Tuesday, January 23, 2018

New Lease on Life

By JAY MEISEL
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SEBRING — It's taken a bit longer than planned, but one of Sebring's historic buildings downtown is well on its way to gaining a new lease on life.

On Saturday, John Anthony, an attorney from Tampa, who bought what is now called the Tavern Building, showed people the restored interior. Features include an elevator, interior stairs, shiny floors, a bar, a newly painted exterior and offices on the second floor.



Restoration of the historic bank building on the circle in downtown Sebring is nearly complete.

Anthony also advocated restoration of historical buildings during the quarterly meeting of the Sebring Historical Society on Saturday. Several news businesses have or are in the works for downtown, including those that would be in Anthony's building.

Nearby, Cranky Frank's BBQ, a restaurant, is expected to open within a week on North Ridgewood Drive. Groomer on the Circle has already opened on the downtown Circle. Groovy's, a business that primarily sells record albums, opened on West Center Avenue, just off the Circle.

Anthony's building was constructed in 1919 by the Sebring Real Estate Co., which was started by Sebring founder George E. Sebring. The building was originally Highlands Bank and Trust Co. It also had what is believed to have been Sebring's first Western Union office. Later

it housed Highlands County Bank and the Heacock Agency. The last occupant was a thrift store run by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Anthony had hoped the restaurant would be opened at the beginning of 2017, but construction complications delayed that, he said.



John Anthony shows Polly Bryant Uselton what used to be the vault of Highlands Bank and Trust Co. Anthony bought the building and is transforming it to be a restaurant on the bottom floor and offices on the top.

Now, Anthony said, he's not necessarily leasing the restaurant space to the first prospect. "I am looking for someone who has the financial capabilities to make it succeed," he said. "It might take a while to find the right fit."

The restaurant will feature a bar that was salvaged from the Peace River Country Club after it closed.

Anthony told members of the historical society that he did his best to protect the historic features of the building. The upstairs was filled with a lot of stuff, he said. "It was like one of those hoarding television shows," he said. Anthony said he encourages people to buy and restore historic buildings. "There's not too much time before you don't have the opportunity," he said.

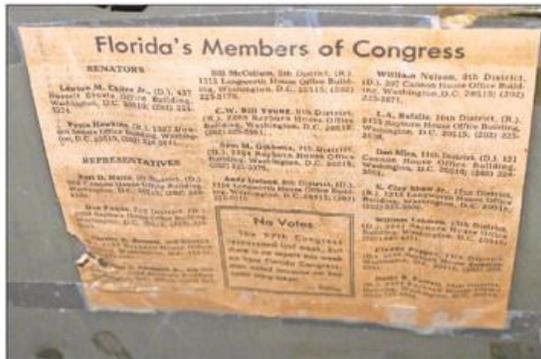
Practically across Ridgewood from Anthony's building will be the new home of Cranky Frank's BBQ.

Frank and Shannan Towell plan to open their business within the next week. Shannan Towell said they decided to move the restaurant because of requests from people on Facebook.

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"A lot of people wanted us to come up this way," Shannan Towell said. She said that before opening the restaurant in Lake Placid, they both worked regular jobs. Then, she said, her husband became ill and was more restricted in what he could do.

"I told him, 'You've got to come up with a plan,'" she said. And a barbecue restaurant was a natural choice, she said, as her husband and his family loved to barbecue.



When work began on rehabilitating the downtown building that originally housed Highlands Bank and Trust Co., a metal cabinet was found. On the door was a list of U.S. senators and Congress members. At the time, which would have been between 1981 and 1987, Lawton Chiles and Paula Hawkins were the U.S. senators representing Florida. Chiles, who served from 1973 to 1989, later became governor. He died in 1998. Hawkins served from 1981 to 1987. She died in 2009.

When they first looked at moving north, Shannan Towell said, they considered a spot on U.S. 27. But, they were encouraged to look downtown, she added. "We drove around (downtown) and had lunch," she said. "We walked around the Circle. We just kind of knew at that moment this is where we need to be." Other business owners, including owners of restaurants, welcomed them, she said. She expects brisket will be the most popular item they serve.



Frank Towell, owner of Cranky Frank's BBQ, is shown doing some barbecuing. He and his wife, Shannan, are moving their business to downtown Sebring.

As for the name, she said, her husband looks cranky sometimes. But that's really not the case, she added.