

HARTFORD NEIGHBORHOOD



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THE ASHLEY CAFÉ at 207-213 Garden St. in Hartford's Asylum Hill has been closed for a couple of years, and the building is mostly vacant. But the Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance plans to spend up to \$1.2 million on renovations over the next two years.

TARGET: DECAY

Group To Remake Asylum Hill Building

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With the blighted Capitol West building targeted for a fast track to demolition, another prominent eyesore less than a mile away in Hartford's Asylum Hill neighborhood is set for a top-to-bottom makeover.

The Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance Inc. will announce today that it has purchased the apartment building with street-level storefronts at the corner of Garden and Ashley streets — and plans to spend as much as \$1.2 million on renovations over the next two years.

The yellow-brick, 1926 building is considered a key in Asylum Hill revitalization efforts because it is on a heavily traveled commuter route and is one of the first buildings people see when they enter the neighborhood by way of Garden Street.

Kenneth D. Johnson, the alliance's executive director, said the two-story building visually conveys that the entire area is decaying, although strides have been made to renovate residential structures throughout the neighborhood.

"This can help change the perception that people have of this area," Johnson said.

The announcement comes just two days

after The Hartford Financial Services Group, headquartered in Asylum Hill, said it would spend \$2 million to help the city buy the Capitol West building, at the eastern edge of its campus, tear it down and redevelop the property.

The alliance's renovation of 207-213 Garden St. would be its largest in a seven-year history of acquiring and renovating vintage Asylum Hill houses. The alliance, better known by its acronym NINA, encourages homeownership to stabilize the neighborhood and property values. The projects are funded by corporate donations, plus state and local government programs.

The Garden Street project would be the alliance's first "mixed-use" renovation.

The alliance has had its eye on the 11,000-square-foot building at the corner of Ashley and Garden streets ever since the organization was formed in 2003.

As the alliance renovated homes, it worried about the perception created by the Garden Street building, associated for years with the noise and littering from patrons of a former tenant, the Ashley Café.

The alliance successfully bought out the café's lease and the business closed a couple of years ago. Buying the building itself was much more difficult. The owner — an investor from Brooklyn, N.Y. — wanted too much and had done little to improve the appearance of the property.

The negotiations spanned years. At one point, the investor sought \$750,000 for a building in which all nine apartments are

vacant. The remaining tenants now are a pizza shop and a liquor store on the ground floor.

The alliance eventually purchased the building for \$323,000, about \$2,000 less than its recently appraised value, Johnson said.

While the café's closing was a major improvement for the area, neighbors said the building still is a magnet for loitering. "The noise is not there, but people are hanging around there because it is a vacant building," said Valerio Giadone, an architect who has lived on Ashley Street for five years.

Giadone said he hopes one of the storefronts will become a restaurant, which he believes will attract workers at both The Hartford and Aetna, which are within walking distance. He also says commuters who now just rush through the intersection will stop and see the changes in the surrounding neighborhood.

The alliance plans to first restore the building's façade. That work, expected to be completed next summer, calls for large storefront windows to replace the smaller ones that now give the building a bunker look. The larger windows were in the building's original design.

More parking will be added on a lot next door owned by the alliance.

A second phase will include creating new retail spaces on the ground floor and renovation of the upper floors for residential and commercial use. The entire project is expected to be completed in 2012.