

16th Street Mall seeks to fill gaps before '08 convention

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The old Fontius Shoe Co. store on downtown Denver's 16th Street Mall -- vacant since the 1980s -- has been called an embarrassment to the city's otherwise vibrant pedestrian mall.

The run-down storefront stands in sharp contrast to nearby, recently redeveloped properties.

Now, with the Democratic National Convention coming to Denver in August 2008, Denver-area retail experts wonder if the Fontius building and other largely vacant and rundown addresses on the mall can be spruced up and developed by the time conventioners converge on Denver.

The city expects the mall, with its stores and restaurants, to be a major draw for conventioners staying at nearby hotels.

The Fontius site is an especially prime target for revitalization before the convention because it's located off Welton Street, a main path conventioners staying at the new Hyatt Regency Denver and Hilton Garden Inn hotels most likely would take to the mall. The Hilton opens this year.

The convention is expected to attract 35,000 people and pump as much as \$200 million into the Denver-area economy.

In recent years, a lot of viable, attractive retail properties have cropped up along the 16th Street Mall, including the 1600 Glenarm high-rise apartment property with retailers such as Cook's Fresh Market, Peet's Coffee & Tea and an Earls Restaurant slated to open this spring.

The 1600 Stout building has added a snazzy-looking Mad Greens salad restaurant and Qwest phone store, and the 16th Street Center offers national retailers from Chili's to Ann Taylor Loft plus local ones such as a Golden-based Good Times burger restaurant.

The Denver Pavilions shopping mall, which turns 10 years old in 2008, has fixed its problematic third floor, which had trouble keeping tenants, by converting it to an entertainment zone. Recently, Jazz @ Jack's, Lucky Strike Lanes and Coyote Ugly have joined the United Artists theater on that level.

Pavilions marketing manager Bethany Garner hopes to have a new restaurant in the vacant Wolfgang Puck's Cafe space on the second floor by the convention, and is talking to restaurants. "Anytime you have national and international press coverage, it can be an impetus for change," Garner said.

Other gaps along the 16th Street Mall include part of the Cottrell's building, across from the Fontius building, and the nearby California Mall being marketed by Gart Properties LLC. A plan for Cottrell's, which could include apartments, is in the works.

While the Federal Reserve Bank on the mall is well-maintained, it also doesn't fit with neighboring businesses and should be moved, according to some area retail brokers.

"It's a zero in the tic-tac-toe grid of downtown Denver," Tom Mathews, retail broker and vice president at CB Richard Ellis Inc. of Denver, said of the Fed building. "We need to get people like that out of their valuable property to other valuable property that better suits their needs."

The old Fontius building is frequently singled out as one of the most blighted parts of the mall. Denver urban planner Ken Schroepfel's [DenverInfill.com](#) blog has criticized the local Cook family, which owns the Fontius building through TDG Cook Co. Ltd., for letting the property languish.

"We, as a community, can build a \$5 billion airport, new stadiums and arenas and museums, and a metrowide light rail, yet we cannot figure out a way to do something about this dilapidated, 48,000-square-foot building in the heart of downtown. Tragic," Schroepfel wrote in June 2006.

The Fontius building was built in 1923 and includes the functioning Denver Wigs and Denver Gifts & Souvenirs stores as well as the vacant Fontius Shoe and Kenmark Shaw's Jewelers spaces. The



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The Fontius space at 16th and Welton streets has been vacant for decades.

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Fontius store space has been empty for more than two decades. A few years ago, it was caught up in a Cook family feud over management of its real estate and other investments.

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In a 2003 Denver District Court lawsuit, sisters Marcie Gelfond Boxer and Monica Gelfond alleged their uncle, Robert Cook, and cousin, Gary Cook, let the Fontius building decline "at a time when the surrounding area was redeveloped profitably," according to a published report. The sisters wanted the court to dissolve the family trusts and investments run by the Cook men.

The case was closed and sealed in September 2004, according to court records. TDG Cook, operated by Robert and Gary Cook, continues to be listed as the property's owner.

Gary Cook didn't return a phone call for comment.

The Cooks are related to the Max Cook Sporting Goods side of the family.

Target Corp. looked at the Fontius property a few years ago for a 160,000-square-foot SuperTarget store, with grocery component, but didn't do a deal with the Cooks.

Denver developer Evan Makovsky of Shames-Makovsky Realty Co. said last year that he wanted to include the Fontius property in his redevelopment of the area between California, 15th and Welton streets, but has been unable to talk to the Cooks, according to a published report.

Denver City Councilwoman Elbra Wedgeworth, who's also president of the Denver 2008 Convention Host Committee, has long encouraged the Cooks to upgrade the building for the mall's benefit. Gary Cook told her last year that something might be in the works, but gave no details and has said nothing more to her since, she said.

"It's hard to do things with a difficult property owner," Wedgeworth said.

There's not much the city or Downtown Denver Partnership Inc., which manages and markets the 16th Street Mall, can do to force retail improvements. Condemning a property would not be easy because condemnation of a privately owned structure usually occurs for a public project.

"Condemnation is a tool people take very seriously," said Kelly Brough, chief of staff for the city and county of Denver. "It requires a project, an initiative, improvement [planned for a property]."

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