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\$20M city high-rise planned

■ Seven-floor project features restaurant, offices, apartments and adjoining garage.

By **TIM MEKEEL**
New Era Staff Writer

Local businessman Tom Ponessa says his new project is both fun and scary.

Fun, because of the exhilaration of developing a vacant downtown property. Scary, because it's a big undertaking.

As in \$20 million big.

Ponessa is planning a seven-story mixed-use building on the northwest corner of Prince and Lemon streets, plus a parking garage directly behind it, at Lemon and Water streets.

"What's going on in the city is very exciting," said Ponessa, who owns a large counseling business and a popular restaurant. "I've got the bug. I want to be a part of it."

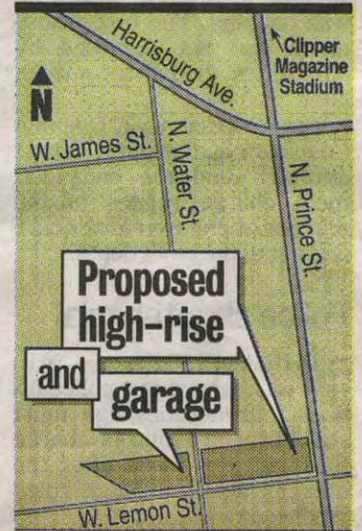
Tentative plans call for the high-rise to have a fine-dining restaurant and lounge on the ground floor, six apartments on the top floor and offices in between, he said Wednesday.

Behind the 100,000-square-foot high-rise would go a parking garage of seven to nine levels, with a 380-car capacity, connected to the office building by a footbridge.

Depending on the time it takes to finalize his plans, which would be subject to city approval, groundbreaking at the former Rainmakers social club property could occur as early as March 2009.

Occupancy could be by year-end 2009 or early 2010.

The high-rise would be across the street from the former Lancaster Press building,



Chris Emlet/NEW ERA

which developer Ed Drogaris is revitalizing, and the City Crossings office complex.

At its size, the project would be a dramatic addition to heavily traveled North Prince Street.

The venture also would fill a prime corner along a corridor that has drawn tens of millions of dollars in new investment in recent years, creating a ballpark, concert hall and more.

In announcing his plans, Ponessa emphasized that the concept is preliminary and being created with the guidance of City Hall and the James Street Improvement District.

"I wouldn't go into this with-

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Ponessa

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out the help and support of the city and the James Street Improvement District. There's a marriage here. It's a true partnership," Ponessa said.

Randy Patterson, the city's director of economic development and neighborhood revitalization, said the city welcomes the general uses that Ponessa is proposing.

Ponessa is the founder of T.W. Ponessa & Associates, a mental health counseling company with 340 employees operating in five counties.

The counseling firm will remain headquartered on Oregon Pike; it will not have space in the high-rise.

Ponessa also is co-owner of Marion Court Room on East Orange Street and the surrounding three-story property, which is being remodeled and leased.

Though Ponessa's high-rise and garage plans still are being devised, the process has been under way since July.

That's when Ponessa bought the half-acre corner lot from the Rainmakers for \$638,000, according to courthouse records. The high-rise would go there.



A \$20 million high-rise and parking garage are being proposed for the former Rainmakers property at Prince and Lemon streets, across from City Crossings.

Friday, he's scheduled to settle on the purchase of an adjoining property at Lemon and Water streets, now a 70-space parking lot. That's where the garage would go.

In addition, Ponessa recently selected Paul Risk Associates to serve as the project's general contractor and **Lewis & Associates to serve as its architect.**

Ponessa also said he has a commitment from a restaurant operator, who he declined to name, to put the fine-dining restaurant and lounge on the high-rise's ground floor.

At the same time, city and James Street Improvement

District officials have referred Ponessa to a likely office tenant who'd fill two or three floors. Again, he declined to name the tenant.

To make way for the high-rise, Ponessa would raze the former Rainmakers club.

The oldest portion of the two-building club was constructed for commercial use in the late 1800s, then modified over the years, according to the Historic Preservation Trust.

The social club had been there for decades, until moving to the former Roadhouse Cafe on East Chestnut Street in late 2004.

Its former home was in the

news in 2005 when it was eyed by developer Harry Eng as part of a spectacular 21-story twin-tower project that would have included the Lancaster Press property.

But Eng's venture fell through in 2006, putting the Rainmakers' property back on the market.

Ponessa noticed: "I saw it as the last piece of really neat property left in the downtown business district. It was like, grab it while you can....It's an exciting corridor, an exciting area."

To make the project a reality, Ponessa would have to secure numerous city approvals, explained Paula Jackson, the city's chief planner.

These would include a height variance from the Zoning Hearing Board. The property's mixed-use zoning allows up to 50 feet or four stories of building height.

He also would have to win City Council approval to defoliate the Rainmakers buildings, since the site is in the Heritage Conservation District.

The city Historical Commission would make a recommendation to council regarding this issue.

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