

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Walls come tumbling downtown

Buildings make way for Centrepoint

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Posted: 1:00 AM | Comments: 0 (including replies)g

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More buildings will be demolished this summer to make way for 311 Portage at Centrepoint, shown in an artist's rendering. (SUPPLIED)

Two more buildings will soon face the wrecking ball as the Longboat Development Corporation continues its \$75-million makeover of the downtown city block north of the MTS Centre.

Demolition fences have been erected around the single-storey Alabama Building on Ellice Avenue, while the four-storey Norlyn Building on Hargrave Street may follow as soon as August.

Both buildings will be flattened to make room for Longboat's 311 Portage at Centrepoint project, a mixed-use development that will eventually encompass most of the block bounded by Ellice and Portage avenues and Hargrave and Donald streets.

During the winter and spring, Longboat demolished the Wild Planet building on Donald and the former A&B Sound building on Portage. With the Mitchell-Copp Building undergoing a brick-by-brick deconstruction in order to preserve its neoclassical façade, the plots of land at the southwest corner of the block will eventually be home to a 20-storey tower, a 154-room ALT hotel and four storeys of office space, with consulting firm Stantec serving as an anchor tenant.

On the northwest side of the block, the Alabama Building will be replaced by a 400-stall parkade and more office space, said Scott Stephanson, vice-president of Longboat, a development company owned by Winnipeg's Chipman family.

The Alabama Building will be demolished as soon as the city's planning department approves the permit, Stephanson said. All of the structure's tenants, including an Ethiopian restaurant, have left.

Tenants in the Norlyn Building on Hargrave will remain until the end of July, Stephanson said. The Norlyn's most famous tenant, the celebrated Wagon Wheel diner, plans to close its doors on July 13, said proprietor Frannie Gomez.

A downtown institution since 1958, the Wagon Wheel is one of Western Canada's last surviving

authentic diners. Gomez, who took over the lunch counter after the death of owner Louis Matthez, has no plans to reopen in a new location.

"I'm going to leave it like this for now," said Gomez, who has been inundated with calls since news of the Norlyn's demolition first broke last year. "I appreciate all the business over the years, on behalf of Louis, his family and at last, me."

Longboat is "down to the final stages of the design" to replace the Norlyn as well as for the rest of the Centrepont development, Stephanson said.

There remains some time to conclude the plan, as the deconstruction of the Mitchell-Copp Building is slow because workers cannot risk toppling the façade, which is supported by steel and concrete bracing, while the rest of the Portage Avenue structure comes down. In the meantime, drilling rigs are on site, ready to begin placing piles, Stephanson said.

The city has contributed \$660,000 to the Centrepont project to preserve the Mitchell-Copp façade.

The only other public funding is a \$5-million low-interest loan for the parkade. The cash came from the sale of the Winnipeg Square parkade in 2010 and will be recouped by the city at a later date, according to a council-approved agreement.

New property taxes flowing from the development, meanwhile, will be plowed into streetscaping and lighting improvements around the MTS Centre across Portage Avenue, as part of a city-provincial tax-increment-financing deal. The first phase of the agreement will see \$8.3 million spent on street-level improvements over the next two years.

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