

# Revival for historic building

## Old fire headquarters to get tenants

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Artist's rendering special to The State

The old Columbia Fire Department headquarters in the Vista is being renovated for retail, restaurant and office space.

Once slated for demolition, the old Columbia Fire Department headquarters is about to become home to one of the city's premier architectural firms and what could be one of the most unusual businesses in the Vista.

The Stevens & Wilkinson architectural firm plans to move into the renovated second floor of the historic Senate Street building.

And A Taste of the South — a 15-year-old St. Andrews mail-order business — will move into the first floor. Owners Elie and Pam Abikhaled plan to open a South Carolina-only specialty food and gift shop as well as a restaurant, bar and cooking school.

The fire station's bay doors will open up the building for sidewalk shopping and dining.

In the future, there are plans for condos and more retail and office space on the lot around the fire station.

"This is going to be a top-notch development," said Fred Delk, executive director of the Columbia Development Corp., which guides investment in The Vista and is helping with the project. "We're going to do it right from Day 1."

A news conference is scheduled for 11 a.m. today to announce the project. Groundbreaking for the renovations is set for July 1.

Delk compared the renovation of the landmark building with the conversion of two Gervais Street icons, the old Confederate Printing Plant into a grocery store and the old

Columbia Mill into museums and offices — key projects that helped build momentum in the old warehouse district.

The fire station is a block from the city's new convention center, downhill from the State House and across the street from the new Hilton hotel.

The move will place the 30-year-old Stevens & Wilkinson firm in one of the most visible locations in the city. It is now in the basement of the Carolina First building at Assembly and Hampton streets.

“We wanted to be a part of the vitality of The Vista,” Stevens & Wilkinson chairman Bobby Lyles said.

A Taste of the South will put some added retail in The Vista with merchandise attractive to tourists. A recent retail study paid for by the city identified local specialty food and gifts as a need in the arts and entertainment district.

“We knew that two years ago,” Abikhaled said. “We wanted to bring something unique and attractive to the Columbia market. We want to showcase to visitors what South Carolina is all about.”

The project is the brainchild of pioneering Main Street developer Tom Pioreschi.

Pioreschi bought the building in 2006 for \$2.35 million after preservationists turned back City Council's efforts to raze the 1950s-era structure.

Abikhaled also had bid on the building, “and I could tell he was disappointed he didn't get it,” said Pioreschi. “So we put together a joint venture.”

Pioreschi and his son, Jeff, helped kick off downtown's residential boom by renovating old buildings on Main Street into the Capital Places condos and apartments. The fire station project will be called Capital Places 7.

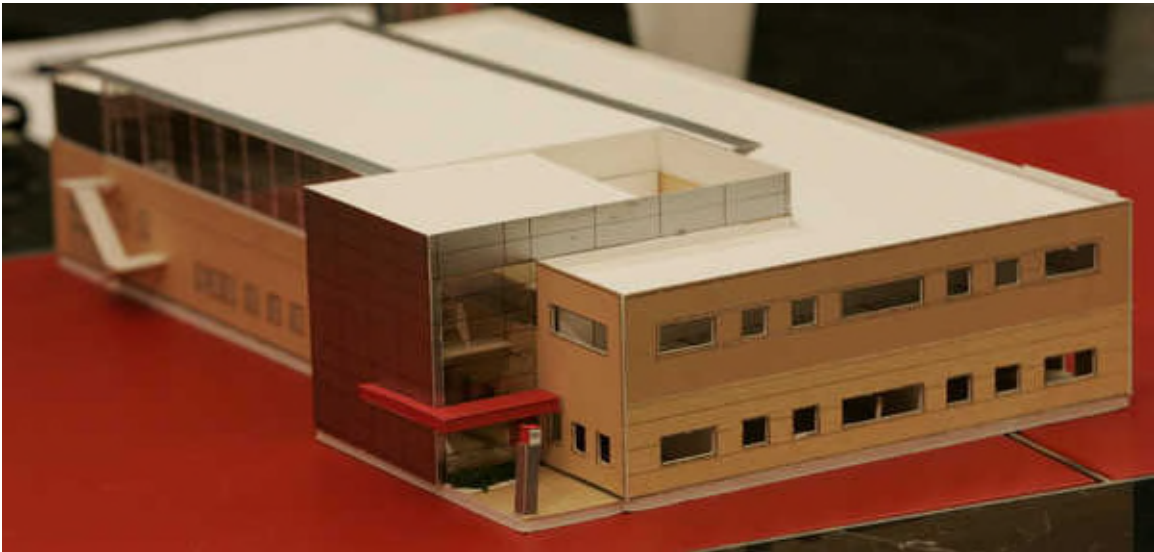
Phase I of the renovation — getting the building ready for the two businesses — will cost \$5 million. It includes adapting the building to environmental guidelines, called LEEDS standards, and incorporating some level of hydrogen fuel-cell power generation.

Columbia and USC are heavily invested in fuel cell research and will host next year's National Hydrogen Association conference.

“We want to be responsible stewards of the environment,” Steven & Wilkinson vice president Ashby Gressette said.

Pioreschi said a second phase of the project will use the garage in the rear, the four-story training tower and some new construction in the back lot to house residential, office and retail.

“But we haven’t decided on the mix yet,” he said.



A model shows Columbia's historic fire department headquarters in the Vista as a specialty food shop, restaurant, bar and headquarters for the Stevens & Wilkinson architecture firm.