

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

MARK TWAIN HOTEL IS GETTING A MAKEOVER

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* When the renovations are complete, the 91-year-hotel will have 238 units.

Developer Amos Harris has started converting the long-neglected, 91-year-old Mark Twain Hotel into a low-cost, single-room hotel mostly for people who work downtown and want to live there, too.

When the renovation is completed at the end of the year, the hotel will have 238 units that Harris expects to fill up quickly.

About 90 people now live in the hotel at Ninth and Pine streets. They will remain there during the construction and move into newly renovated rooms as they are finished. Harris said he has been turning away others who wanted to live there so the hotel would be as vacant as possible for the construction workers.

"Most of the people who live here work for cleaning companies, parking companies, at other hotels downtown, at the convention center, Kiel Center or the dome," he said.

"Sometimes, these people don't have good credit references and they can't afford to make a deposit on an apartment. . . . They need a place to live," he said.

After the renovation is completed, rents in the hotel will increase by about 50 cents a night and range from \$10.50 to \$13.50 a night.

Harris, a 39-year-old transplanted New Yorker, bought the historic old hotel three years ago. He has been working since then to put together the \$7.5 million he needed to buy and renovate the hotel.

What he finally got together earlier this week includes a \$1.2 million loan from First Bank, a \$2.4 million loan from the St. Louis-based **Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance**, and a \$400,000 loan Harris himself is kicking in.

The remaining money comes from investors who have bought state and federal historic renovation tax credits, and low-income housing tax credits that various state and federal agencies approved. First Bank bought \$400,000 worth of the credits, and The Enterprise Social Investment Corp., in Columbia, Md., bought \$3.1 million worth. Mercantile Bank provided bridge financing, which enabled Harris to

make some safety-related improvements while he was putting permanent financing together.

The hotel was designed by St. Louis architect A.B. Groves with unusual vertical stacks of bay windows, and whimsical terra cotta friezes on the outside. It opened in 1907 as the Maryland Hotel, was later named the Biltmore Hotel, then the Mark Twain.

The hotel presently has Gregory's, Luigi's Pizza and Schlotsky's restaurants at the street level, and Candy's Chili Parlor in the basement. All will remain.

Renovating old buildings into single-room hotels, called SROs, has been popular in other downtowns, but this is the first project of its kind here. The only other low-cost, single room hotels in the downtown area now are the Salvation Army's Railton Residence at 205 North 18th Street, and the Lincoln Hotel at 2228 Olive Street.

Trivers Associates designed the renovation to preserve as much as possible of the old hotel's historic character.

"The building has never been substantially upgraded and many of the original details, such as a marble lobby and decorative plaster ceilings remain under layers of coverings. Many of these historic elements will be refurbished and exposed once again," Harris said.
