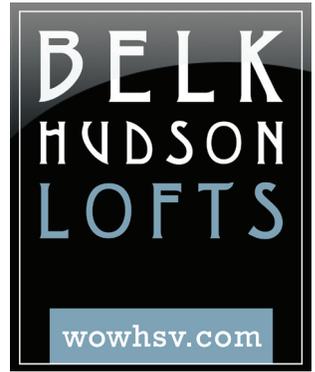


Who wants to live in downtown Huntsville? Answer could come this fall with opening of Belk Hudson Lofts

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Charlie Sealy III talks about the construction of the apartments during a tour of the \$11.5 million Belk Hudson Lofts apartment building in downtown Huntsville, Ala. Wednesday, June 27, 2012. The 75 apartments are scheduled to be ready for tenants later this year. (The Huntsville Times/Eric Schultz)

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama -- Charlie and Sasha Sealy will learn the results this fall of Huntsville's most intriguing real estate experiment:

Do young professionals, retirees and empty nesters really want to live downtown?

The Sealys are betting about \$12.5 million that they do. The couple's Belk Hudson Lofts apartment building, nearing completion at the corner of Washington Street and Holmes Avenue, is the first privately-owned rental housing built downtown in decades.

Due to open in October, it boasts 75 one- and two-bedroom apartments with sweeping views of the Huntsville skyline, Monte Sano, the church spires of the Twickenham Historic District and beyond.

"When we started to develop it, I thought the views would be good," Charlie Sealy said while showing a Times reporter and photographer around the building Wednesday. "But it's turned out much better than I expected."

Although it has been billed as affordable downtown housing, Belk Hudson Lofts won't be a cheap place to live. The apartments will rent for \$875 to \$1,650 a month, depending on size, views and other factors.

About half the units have balconies or terraces; others feature exposed brick walls and steel window beams from the facade of the 1920s Belk building.

Prospective tenants haven't been allowed to tour the six-story apartments yet because construction is still under way.

Even so, Sealy said the project has drawn significant interest from people of all ages.

“It’s going to be a good diversity (of tenants), I believe,” he said.

Sealy’s family business, Sealy Management, owns and operates about 8,000 suburban apartment units across the Southeast, including more than 2,300 in the Huntsville area. Belk Hudson Lofts is unlike anything the company has done before.

There are about 100 parking spaces for residents and visitors tucked behind the brick walls on street level as well as the basement.

“We designed it so you couldn’t see the parking from the street,” said Sealy. “We wanted it to be more urban-looking.”

The rest of the first floor will feature a leasing office, common area with big-screen TVs, sofas and Wi-Fi access, fitness room and yoga/pilates area. Also, the entire building will be smoke-free.

“It’s really an amenity for the residents in terms of health,” Sealy said.

Architecture and history buffs, the Sealys insisted on saving a faded advertisement for the long-vanished Fowler Bros. department store painted on a wall that was going to be demolished.

Workers numbered each brick so the 28-foot-long mural could be pieced back together for display in a ground floor hallway.

Fowler Bros. occupied the corner of Washington Street and Holmes Avenue before the Great Depression. Belk took over the space in the 1940s.

Belk building in downtown Huntsville (pre-renovation).JPGThe Belk building in downtown Huntsville as it appeared in August 2011, before work on the apartments began.

The Sealys also chose to re-use the Belk building’s original four-story facade, which gives the contemporary structure a familiar feel.

“It keeps a look that’s been here for so long,” Charlie Sealy said.

The City of Huntsville is paying the Sealys \$450,000 over five years for a facade easement, which guarantees the preservation of the historic outer walls and gives the city a say in the color scheme and other exterior features.

While Sealy estimates the project is about 70 percent complete, the inside remains largely unfinished. An army of construction workers scurried around Wednesday threading electrical wires, hanging insulation and hammering drywall into place.

But the Sealys are also paying close attention to the small details.

While touring a sixth-floor apartment, Sasha Sealy pointed out a crooked air condition-

ing vent to a supervisor from Golden Construction, the general contractor. Charlie Sealy stopped to tell a worker where he wanted the speakers placed for the rooftop terrace.

“It’s been stressful, but also fun,” said Sasha Sealy.

Charlie Sealy said he hopes Belk Hudson Lofts will encourage more entrepreneurs to take a chance on downtown. Standing in an apartment overlooking Washington Street, you can see a number of vacant storefronts in need of a rebirth, including the former Heritage Club.

“I’d like for the apartments to be a catalyst to bring more shops and restaurants downtown,” said Sealy. “Hopefully, our project will be a step toward getting that critical mass downtown that restaurants and retail can feed off.”