



Multi-tenant retail project planned for site of former Local Hero's bar

By Colleen Jones
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Local business owner William Smith is betting on the past success of similar projects in his plans to bring another multi-tenant shopping mall to the St. George Street area.

Smith is about to submit a building permit application to the City of St. Augustine to construct a new structure at 18 St. George St. that will house nine or more retail units under one roof attached to 11 Spanish St., the adjoining site that used to be Local Hero's Bar & Grill.

Smith already owns St. George's Row and Heritage Walk, two mini-malls on St. George Street that contain a mix of shops and eateries. His latest concept, however, will differ in that it will not have a center walkway and each unit will be accessed separately by a pedestrian path running between St. George and Spanish streets.

Smith first submitted plans to demolish the vacant property at 18 St. George St. to the city's Historical Architectural Review Board and, following a three-year process involving several iterations of the project, received final approval for the demolition and rebuild in December.

The abutting property at 11 Spanish St. — known for years as a local watering hole — will be rehabilitated both internally and externally.

"Our goal is to bring it back closer to the standard it was before [Local Hero's]," Smith told *The Record* Wednesday.

Just as he independently operates Rendezvous Restaurant in St. George's Row and Barefoot Bill's in Heritage Walk, Smith plans to launch some kind of a restaurant or cafe in the space.

It's a concept that has worked out well previously, said Smith, who has been a property owner in St. Augustine for 30 years.

"Instead of having one single tenant to pay rent for a space downtown, you're splitting that up," Smith said.

Customers like the idea of browsing through a pedestrian walkway with shops on either side, he added.

"You're able to give space to the mom-and-pops and have a different mix of retail," Smith said.

Smith purchased 11 Spanish St. and 18 St. George St. as a combined property in a 2016 auction, paying \$2.5 million for both.

The project did face some opposition initially in the review process with HARB, as well as public hearings, with some community members saying the property, which dates back to the 1890s, was historic and should not be torn down. Smith successfully argued that the structure had gone through several renovations, the most recent in the 1960s.

Local architect Don Chrichlow is designing the site plan for the new building, which will have a Spanish Colonial look.

"We are very much vested in downtown St. Augustine," Smith said. "We want to build something we're proud of."

Smith's wife, Kim, will be the leasing agent for the property, and the couple wants to ensure a good mix of types of retail so the venture is successful.

Each of the individual units in the mini-mall will be between 400 and 500 square feet, but a tenant could put more than one space together for lease. The total footprint of the project is just under 5,000 square feet.

Smith is working on finalizing a building permit application. Between demolition and reconstruction, he said, the new business could possibly open by about this time next year.