

Council OK expected for hotel planned for Congress Avenue

26-story building would add 130 rooms, restaurant to downtown

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The Austin City Council today is expected to approve a zoning change for a 26-story boutique hotel proposed for Congress Avenue, which would be the first new hotel on downtown's main street in 45 years.

The zoning change would allow additional square footage and a curb modification for valet parking, along with historical zoning for the property at 416 Congress Ave. Plans call for 130 guest rooms, a bar, a restaurant, private dining rooms and a fourth-floor deck for weddings and other events.

Dick Clark Architecture is designing the project, which would stack a modern tower above the facade of the 1893-vintage Robertson building. The tower would be set back from Congress Avenue.

Several city commissions, including planning and historic landmark, have recommended the zoning change, and council approval is anticipated, Clark Patterson, a senior planner with the city, said Wednesday.

Mike McHone, a consultant helping the Houston-based owner obtain the city entitlements for the project, said the hotel could open in late 2012.

Dan Benditz owns the Romanesque-style building, constructed for James H. Robertson, a former Travis County district attorney, district judge and state lawmaker. The building is one of only a few original structures that remain on Congress Avenue dating back more than 100 years.

The project would be the first new hotel on the stretch of Congress Avenue between Lady Bird Lake and the Capitol since the Wilbur Clark Crest Hotel (now the Radisson Hotel and Suites) opened in 1966, said Molly Alexander, associate director of the Downtown Austin Alliance.

McHone said having more hotel rooms downtown will be an economic boost for the city, bringing in additional tax revenue along with tourists who spend their money here.

Downtown Austin needs more hotel rooms, said some analysts and Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau officials, who, like Mayor Lee Leffingwell, want to see a second convention-center hotel downtown to supplement the 800-room Hilton Austin.

Since year-end 2007, 752 hotel rooms have been added downtown, a 10.8 percent increase, compared with 3,681 additional guest rooms citywide, a 14.3 percent increase, according to Smith Travel Research, an industry consulting firm.

Growing events, such as South by Southwest, have taxed downtown hotels' capacity.

The newest downtown hotel, a 251-room W, opened in December. Several proposed downtown hotels were put on hold during the recession, including a Marriott convention hotel on the east side of Congress Avenue. Developer White Lodging Services Corp. remains interested in building a hotel of that size downtown and plans to start construction this summer on a 296-suite Hyatt Place at Third Street and San Jacinto Boulevard. Developers of the proposed Hotel Van Zandt on downtown's eastern edge say that project is still a year or two away, pending construction financing.

Other planned downtown hotels include a Westin at Third and Colorado streets proposed by Hixon Properties Inc., a 17-story luxury hotel planned by Starwood Capital Group at Fifth and Colorado streets in the Warehouse District, and a hotel proposed as part of the redevelopment of the former Seaholm Power Plant on West Cesar Chavez Street.



Courtesy of JB Goodwin