



# The Progress-Index

## Developer wants to turn old Luggage building into new dwellings

*By: Jennifer Francis, Staff Writer 02/08/2003*

PETERSBURG - To many in the city, it is an ugly and monstrous source of disharmony, a once bustling pillar of industry fallen into disrepair.

To Robin Miller, it is a visionary's dream come true and in his hands, the dilapidated and dreary old Seward Luggage building in Petersburg's Old Towne Historic District could be brought back from the brink.

"I take old buildings and give them life again," Miller said. "That's what I do."

Hailed as one of the pioneers of residential development in downtown Richmond, Miller knows a thing or two about taking abandoned buildings and transforming them into hot, in-demand apartments and condominiums. President and owner of Miller & Associates, he has had his fingers in the pots of Richmond redevelopment for about nine years, turning historic buildings like Linden Tower and Kensington Court, the former Johnston-Willis Hospital, into upscale apartment complexes.

The kind with wide windows overlooking even wider main streets.

The kind with as many as 2,200 square feet of living space.

The kind that people pay anywhere from \$200,000 to \$300,000 to call home.

He has made a name for himself with Richmond's politicians, movers and shakers and historical societies and now, Miller is turning his sights on Petersburg.

Miller's company currently has options on the old Seward Luggage building on High Street as well as the defunct Petersburg Hotel on West Tabb Street. He's seriously contemplating renovating the old structures and working his magic to create high dollar, high class condominiums. And while the plans to sell the city-owned properties to the Richmond-based developer are still in rough draft form, city officials are upbeat and excited about the potential project.

"It's still very early but this is definitely what we are looking at when we talk about revitalizing downtown and saving some of these historic buildings," said Petersburg City Manager B. David Canada. "Developing these buildings into apartments or condominiums would certainly have a positive impact on the city and draw more people to our area. "

The concept is simple. Take one old building, complete with high ceilings, wide open spaces and unique architecture, and convert them into

living space in the heart of a downtown district.

It has worked for the developers who turned once deteriorating tobacco warehouses in Richmond into lofty apartments.

It has worked for Miller in Tennessee and again in Virginia's capital city.

He has a notion, it will work in Petersburg.

"There is a lot of history and beautiful architecture in Petersburg and I think that it is close enough to Richmond that people would want to live, work and play in Petersburg," Miller said. "There is a large demand for these types of homes that isn't being met and I think that they will come here if the homes and the prices are right."

The idea of purchasing and renovating the two old buildings in Petersburg has been swirling in Miller's mind for close to 18 months. He has talked with city officials, done the necessary homework in regards to tax credits and abatement for revitalizing historic property, and taken a good hard look at the community.

Where critics see problems, Miller sees promise.

Where Miller sees promise, Petersburg residents see a bright future.

"Petersburg is a city that needs money and to bring money into Petersburg you have to bring people into Petersburg," said outspoken city resident Richard A. Stewart. "What they are talking about

doing, it sounds wonderful and it is about time. This is what this city needs."

There is a story behind the old Seward Luggage building that lifelong city residents like Stewart know well.

Built around 1878, the multi-story building with its oversized windows and brick walls was home to the Seward Luggage Manufacturing Co. Inc. for more than 100 years.

The monstrous 200,000 square-foot building lies on both sides of Lafayette Street between High and Commerce Streets in the Old Towne Historic District, neighboring residential communities and business districts. In 1986, the well-established company opted to move into the Anchor shed warehouse complex, abandoning the High Street building and donating it to the city. Since that time it has remained virtually empty.

The Petersburg Hotel too has a story of its own.

"I remember when the Petersburg Hotel was beautiful and the brass was shiny," Stewart said. "I remember when it was beautiful."

Once a shining beacon of the downtown district, the hotel fell to the wayside as many businesses and people opted to forsake the older section of the city for the Crater Road corridor or neighboring Colonial Heights.

It was given to the city in 1975, and was sporadically used through the 1980s as an auxiliary office for the city government complex. A renovation effort in 1987 failed and a year later the

building was added to the city's historic zoning district in an effort to preserve what was left of the defunct hotel. Like the old Seward Luggage building, it has remained empty.

According to the City Assessor's office, the old Seward Luggage warehouse and factory is worth about \$257,700, while the old Petersburg Hotel is assessed at \$282,200. Neither are currently on the city tax books.

But all that could change if Miller finds that his proposed condominiums would be marketable. According to Miller, initial design concepts by architects have been done, but before anything can move forward environmental studies and marketing plans would also have to be looked at. Like so many things up for sale, condominiums are market driven. If the demand is not there, if the cost of renovating the sites isn't worth what Miller can get for them, the project will never come to fruition.

Miller, however, has faith.

"I think people will want to live there and will be interested in buying these condominiums," Miller said. "I can't make any promises right now, but I do see a lot of possibilities ahead."

If everything goes the way city officials are hoping, sale papers could be signed by fall.

Of course a number of things have to fall in place before contracts get signed, condominiums get built and people begin moving in.

But with such promising plans on the horizon, city officials can't help but beam.

"It would be a great day for Petersburg," Canada said. "Revitalization is key."

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