

# **A downtown revival**

Conversion of historic firehouse, city offices could get started as soon as early next year



Downtown Hartford's firehouse, once the headquarters for the entire city, is included in the redevelopment plan.  
Kenneth R. Gosselin/Hartford Courant



This 1926 building on Main Street across from city hall could be converted to 40 apartments in a \$7.8 million project. The building formerly was occupied by Hartford's municipal public works department. Mark Mirko/Hartford Courant

BY KENNETH R. GOSSELIN HARTFORD COURANT

**HARTFORD** — Conversion of two historic buildings near downtown Hartford’s Bushnell Park into apartments could get started early next year, if the city council backs selling the properties to a developer and using city funds to help finance the projects.

Mayor Luke Bronin has asked the city council to consider selling the now closed firehouse on Pearl Street and the former municipal building at 521-529 Main St. across from city hall to Wonder Works Construction Corp. of New York. Wonder Works has developed 560 rentals in the downtown area, beginning with the former Sonesta Hotel on Constitution Plaza in 2011.

In letters to the city council, Bronin said the city has reached proposed agreements with Wonder Works that call for combined loans of \$4.9 million in city funds designated for economic development, tax breaks stretching out a decade and a deferral of paying the sale price for the two properties.

“These are long-vacant, city-owned buildings, and they are challenging properties — especially the old firehouse — to redevelop,” Bronin said Thursday, in a text.

“By packaging these two and using incentives to leverage substantial private investment, we’re able to get these properties redeveloped, brought back to life and put back on the tax rolls.”

If the city council agrees to consider the proposed agreements, a public hearing on the sales could be held Oct. 18.

Both the firehouse and the former municipal building are nearly a century old and have been targeted for redevelopment for several years. The firehouse, which once was the fire response headquarters for the entire city, closed in early 2020. The conversions would take place at the same time.

The firehouse would be converted to 40 market-rate rentals with a restaurant on the ground floor at a cost of \$9 million. Wonder Works founder and chairman Joseph Klaynberg has said a restaurant already has been found for the space, but he declined to name it.

Across Bushnell Park from the firehouse, the city office building on Main Street would be fitted out with 41 apartments with storefront space in a \$7.4 million conversion. The rentals would be a mix of affordable and market-rate units. Existing tenants such as the Cornerstone Deli would remain, Klaynberg has said.

The proposal for 521-529 Main also includes a lease for a parking lot behind the building where there is a potential for a new apartment building facing Bushnell Park. Wonder Works would lease the parking for \$32,500 annually for five years, with an option to buy the land for \$162,000.

The proposed purchase prices — \$360,000 for the firehouse and \$425,000 for the 521-529 Main — would not be paid until loans on the property are refinanced or the developer sells them.

The tax breaks involve payments to city coffers based on gross revenues, rather than assessed values. There would be no payments in the first three years and gradually rise to 7% by the tenth year after the buildings are ready for occupancy.

The loans to Wonder Works would be administered through the Capital Region Development Authority.

Kenneth R. Gosselin can be reached at [kgosselin @courant.com](mailto:kgosselin@courant.com).