

Sunloft Center on its way to becoming downtown landmark

I stopped by the office of Ann and Martin Schulz (Florida Insel Properties) last Wednesday to get an update on the progress of the Sunloft Center, now under construction at the site of the late — and unlamented — Professional Center.

The Schulzes are the local representatives of Austrian builder Franz Hartl, and the Center, in case you haven't read any Punta Gorda Herald's during the past few months, lies right underneath that great big construction crane that dominates downtown.

I have to admit I'm generally not a fan of cranes, but this one is a welcome sight. Five Star/SandStar's Jim Sanders told me it's the first tower crane ever in downtown Punta Gorda.

That great big crane shouts out "progress" on downtown's biggest — and most advanced — construction project. I can write that without fear of being contradicted because the other big projects — the Eventorium (mired in FEMA paperwork); City Marketplace (tangled up in a lawsuit); and Harbor Inn (wrangling with the city) aren't moving any dirt at the moment.

And progress is a word Ann and Martin used to describe what's going on behind that tall construction fence.

Martin told me, "We are on track and making progress; Everything is running smoothly."

Right now, most of that progress is occurring in that big hole in the ground, which is just about filled with concrete and steel.

Soon, when the vertical work begins, we will begin to get a feel for how the building is going to fit into the downtown streetscape.

Actually, you can get a feel for that now by studying the artist renderings on page 3 showing a distant and a closer view of the Taylor Street and West Marion Avenue corner of the building. The multiple facades that make up the building's outer shell look right at home there.

One thing I didn't realize until last Wednesday is that corner is closely modeled after the gracious old Princess Hotel that used to occupy the space. Compare the old postcard of the hotel on this page to the renderings on page 3, and check out the new building's roof line, the way it sits on the corner and even the supports that run from the canopy up to the second floor. A nice touch.

Despite the fact that the building is a big hole in the ground and marketing is just beginning, the Schulzes are already making some progress in locating prospective buyers for the 15 fourth-floor condominiums, thanks to an innovative "reservation" program.

"We have three reservations from current Punta Gorda residents already," Ann said, "and we haven't even started advertising yet."

The reservation program allows prospective buyers to plunk down \$10,000, thereby reserving the condo of their choice. Since final asking prices won't be established for some time, prospective buyers with a reservation can opt out, with a full refund, if prices end up higher than their budget allows. That removes the risk for buyers but still lets them have first dibs on the location they prefer.

"It protects us and the buyer," Martin said.

Although all they have to show potential "reservers" is a rough floor plan and the artist renderings,

the Schulzes have an ace up their sleeve when the time comes to print a glossy brochure — photos taken from the crane that show the view from way up there.

Marketing is only in the talking stage for the second and third-floor office space and the retail on ground level, according to the Schulzes.

They are looking for a trendy restaurant for the prime retail space at the corner of West Marion and Taylor, a 5,800-square-foot space big enough to seat more than 270 diners.

“Our biggest goal right now is to find the right restaurant for the project,” Ann said.

Although it’s too early, they envision a place similar to Cru, located in the Fort Myers Bell Tower Shops. “The food is good, the service excellent, and it has lots of energy,” Ann said.

Energy; now that’s something downtown could use.

We’re going to get a better look at the Sunloft Center way before the exterior is up and visible, according to the Schulzes.

“We’ve already talked to the city about a mesh dust screen that will go up on the fence,” Martin said.

The screen, along the Taylor and Marion fences, looks and feels like fiberglass and has a functional utility. It will keep dust from blowing out onto the nearby streets. It also is likely to prove a good marketing tool. Imprinted on the screen will be artist renderings of the building facades — the Marion facade along Marion and the Taylor facade along Taylor.

If it looks as good as I think it will, you’re going to want to reach for your checkbook. The Schulzes are at 941-505-0482

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Not a coincidence; the old Princess Hotel, as seen on an old postcard, looks remarkably like the artist renderings of the Sunloft Center pictured on page 3, right down to the roof line and the supports that run from the canopy up to the second floor. ILLUSTRATIONS PROVIDED



Left, an artist rendering of the Marion/Taylor intersection, and, above, a more sweeping view showing the building's Marion and Taylor facades.