

Law firm wants to return to downtown

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CHAMPAIGN – The massive fire that dislodged a Champaign law firm hasn't destroyed the firm's desire to be in downtown Champaign.

The Dobbins, Fraker, Tennant, Joy & Perlstein law firm would like to return to downtown Champaign, either at a rented location or a place of its own, partner Richard Joy said this week.

The firm was forced to vacate its damaged building at 215 N. Neil St. after fire destroyed the neighboring Metropolitan Building on Nov. 7. Since then, it has been operating at 3001 Research Road in Champaign's Interstate Research Park.

Joy said the quarters work well – "it's excellent, except where it is" – and the firm is "not desperate" to move soon. He said the attorneys are sorting out options, recognizing there are advantages to both renting and buying.

The firm, which has a staff of about 15, now occupies a little less than 6,000 square feet, but Joy said it will be looking for more space – specifically, space that's expandable, with abundant storage for files.

The law firm's building downtown is being torn down after structural engineers determined that fire had damaged the north wall.

Demolition is expected to continue through Feb. 27, but one lane of Neil is expected to reopen for traffic late Friday afternoon, said Craig Rost, Champaign's deputy city manager for development.

A one-block section of Neil between Church and Park has been closed to traffic since Nov. 18.

A crane has blocked both lanes of Neil, but Rost said it can soon be moved partially onto the site, freeing up one lane. The crane is expected to be disassembled at the end of next week, with smaller equipment being used for demolition after that.

Joy said the law firm won't return to the site at 215 N. Neil St.

"I don't anticipate another structure on the lot," he said, adding that anything eventually developed there will likely encompass the Metropolitan Building site to the north.

Twenty years ago, the firm made extensive renovations to a historic building so it could move in. But Joy said it's unlikely it will again occupy a building as old as that one.

Besides dealing with more routine problems such as leaks and tuck-pointing, Joy said, he came to understand that the building had more problems than he knew.

"We discovered the walls, by virtue of age, were probably not as impact-resistant as we thought," he said.

The building stood for decades without a problem, but if the walls were damaged, the building was vulnerable, he said.

Joy said the fire also made him realize the "vulnerability of all wood construction," even with a sprinkler system.

When asked about the status of insurance settlements, Joy said the dealings were complicated and time-consuming.

"It's now a matter of working through the details," he said.

Rost said redevelopment at the southwest corner of Church and Neil streets will depend on the property owners, whom he termed "motivated people." He said the city would like a mixed-use development there, with retail on the ground floor and perhaps a hotel.

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