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Experience Columbus at crossroads

Squeezed for space, visitors bureau will renovate or move

By Mike Pramik
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Experience Columbus says it has outgrown its headquarters a block from Capitol Square and is considering a move to the Arena District.

Then again, central Ohio's convention and visitors bureau might stay put, thanks to a plan by its landlord to pump \$1.4 million into the bureau's building at 90 N. High St.

The bureau will decide by May, when its decade-old lease expires, said Paul Astleford, Experience Columbus president. He said the bureau has outgrown the 17,000-square-foot building, limiting its planned hiring of several executives.

"We've been putting off our strategic plan because we have no place to put them," he said.

Longtime Columbus developers George Bavelis and Sandy Solomon, who own 90 N. High, have hired 3D/Group Inc. to redesign the building.

The building sits amid a block

of dilapidated structures that include the old Madison's department store. A renovation would continue the momentum that is under way nearby with Casto's \$21 million renovation at Broad and High streets. Bavelis and Solomon have retained former Columbus Mayor Dana G. "Buck" Rinehart to represent them. And Rinehart, always a staunch backer of Downtown, thinks the bureau should remain near the city's core.

"Broad and High is the center of Columbus; that's the anchor," Rinehart said. "Here we have a couple of owners who are willing to make a major investment in the anchor area.

"With compliments to the Arena District, we're not moving Columbus to the Nationwide area. Downtown Columbus is Broad and High."

Yet the bureau thinks it might make sense to move.

Astleford said relocating to the Arena District could help the bureau attract conventions

because meeting planners would get an up-close look at Nationwide Arena and other attractions near the Greater Columbus Convention Center.

"You want to draw those buyers to the area of the community that is most likely to attract them," he said. "Areas like the Brewery District, German Village, the Arena District, the Short North, those are the kind of areas that draw visitors."

Astleford said the bureau also wants a visitors center, and both locations have obliged.

Brian Ellis, president of Arena District developer Nationwide Realty Investors, said his company has made a "market rate" offer to Experience Columbus to occupy space at 277 W. Nationwide Blvd. It includes second-floor office space and first-floor space that would be the visitors center.

Ellis, who's on the Experience Columbus board, said he is not taking part in the decision. Experience Columbus has retained Staubach Co. to nego-

tiate lease terms.

Either way, it appears that Experience Columbus is about to have its rent raised. Astleford said the bureau is paying \$12.50 per square foot in rent. The initial proposal by the current owners includes rent of \$18.50 per square foot.

Net rents in the Arena District typically run from \$15.50 to \$16.50 per square foot.

Astleford said the bureau has considered dozens of locations and has narrowed the choices to the Arena District and its current building. He said it could come down to cost and that the plans for 90 N. High St. have some appeal.

"They've gone out of their way to try to make this work," Astleford said. "If their pricing is in the ballpark of what buildings are getting there's a good chance we would stay here."

mpramik@dispatch.com