

'This is transit-oriented development': Springfield officials tour renovated Overland Lofts - masslive.com

SPRINGFIELD — One of Springfield Mayor Domenic J. Sarno's favorite catchphrases is "back to the future," and this time, with the \$15 million [Overland Lofts](#) project, it fits.

Davenport Companies of Boston has transformed the Willys-Overland building at 151 Chestnut St. — built in 1917 as an automobile showroom and warehouse — into 60 modern apartments with [COVID-19](#)-era touches like work-from-home offices and separate ventilation systems so air doesn't mingle between units.

It's the first new apartment complex in Springfield's downtown in decades.

In a touch Sarno pointed out, each unit has its own laundry washer and dryer. There is off-street parking available for all residents, some of it in an indoor garage to the rear of 3,600 square feet of retail space.

"You guys did a marvelous job," Sarno said.

The property is expected to open in December following more than a year of construction.

Along with Sarno on a tour of the building Wednesday was city Chief Development Officer Tim Sheehan; Shaun Dwyer, vice president for commercial lending at PeoplesBank, the project lender; folks from The Horton Group, of New Haven, Connecticut, the construction contractor; and

members of the Springfield Business Improvement District.

"We had a lot of fun," said Juan Prieto, co-principal at Davenport and the project manager. "It's a great project."

Charles Irving, principal at Davenport, explained a bit of the building's history and pointed out the elevator Willys used to store cars upstairs. Willys was well known for its jeep and had sister buildings in Detroit, St. Louis, Toledo, Ohio, and elsewhere that have also been rehabbed with housing and retail.

Inside, rooms are punctuated by what designers now call "martini columns." The concrete uprights flare at the top, like a martini glass, to support the weight of the building.

The Willys-Overland building has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1983 due to its connection to Springfield's automotive history.

The 2012 gas explosion at Scores Gentlemen's Club, 453 Worthington St., happened right next door.

"The explosion blew right through this building," Irving said. "But because it was built so well, it barely even budged."

Davenport Companies bought the property in December 2017 or [\\$450,000 from Ciocca Construction Corp. of Wilbraham.](#)

Irving said state and federal tax credits for historic preservation projects, along with Massachusetts Housing Development Incentive Program funding through the city, allow Davenport to offer affordable rents after investing the money to do the project right.

"We hope this is where the next generation of students and teachers will

live," Irving said.

The cheapest rent is \$850 a month for a 450-square-foot studio. Larger apartments can rent for \$1,200 a month or as high as \$1,400 a month for a two-bedroom, fourth-floor duplex apartment with two bedrooms and an office on two floors.

"It was built like that because there used to be a skylight running down the length of the building," Prieto said. "And if you notice, the further you go up the building the higher the ceilings get, from 12 feet to 14 feet or more up here."

From the top-floor apartments, Prieto pointed out Union Station a few blocks away.

"This is transit-oriented development," he said.

To which Sarno expressed optimism about [east-west rail](#), commuter train service from Pittsfield through Springfield and Worcester to Boston.

Prieto pointed out a Lyman Street building Davenport owns, with plans to reconstruct it into apartments if the Willys-Overland project is a success.

Davenport is also redeveloping the former Registry of Motor Vehicles building on Liberty Street. It built the Davenport Square complex with a CVS across from MGM Springfield, and it owns the Springfield Plaza.

In the retail space at the Willys-Overland building, Prieto said Davenport is talking with tenants but has no deals in place.

"We really want something that enlivens the neighborhood and adds amenities," he said. "Something that is open late at night."

Ideas include a grocery, cafe or restaurant in what could be subdivided, multitenant space.

Sonya Yelder, owner of Souper Sweet Sandwich Shop on Belmont Avenue and a co-owner of [Granny's Baking Table](#) on Bridge Street, hopes to bring a Souper Sweet location to the building.