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### **Something new under Utz sign**

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Architecture

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It's known to many as the "Utz building" because of the large rooftop sign advertising a certain brand of potato chips. Its original name is Old Town National Bank, after the original occupant.

Soon, the seven-level building at 221-233 N. Gay St. will be reborn as Baltimore's newest hotel, one of three planned for the eastern edge of downtown.

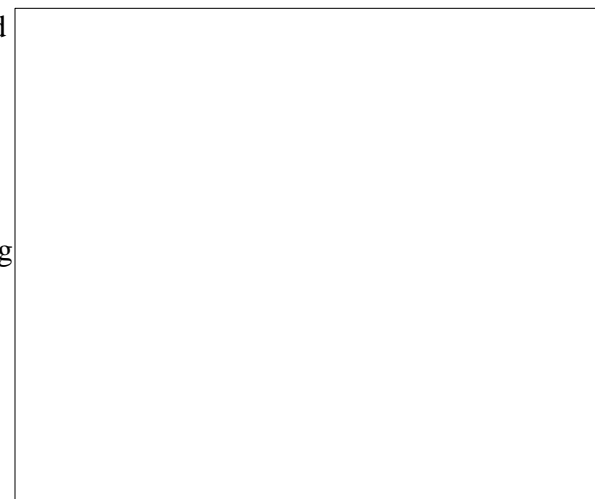
Local businessman Nicholas Piscatelli heads a group that plans to begin converting the 1924 building to a 70-room, \$8 million hotel before winter and open it by late next year.

It's the second bank conversion for Piscatelli, who turned a former Mercantile branch on East Redwood Street into a nightclub in 2001. "I seem to love the banks for some reason," he acknowledges.

Designed in a Classic Revival style by Frederick Fletcher, the Gay Street building has a stately exterior with Corinthian pilasters flanking bronze doors at the main entrance and an ornate lobby with a mezzanine. It housed a bank until the 1960s and then was converted to offices for others, most recently a state agency. It has been vacant for the past three years.

Piscatelli said he bought the building several years ago with the thought of turning it into condominiums. When the housing market cooled, he sought office tenants. Before any signed on, investors approached him with the idea of creating a "limited service" hotel and he agreed with that plan.

Highly visible from the Jones Falls Expressway, the building lends itself to hotel conversion, with common areas on the first level and basement, and guest rooms above, Piscatelli said.



"We're going to keep it pretty much the way it was," he said. Continental breakfast can be served downstairs, in the lobby. The bank vault on the first floor will be a business center, and there will be a gym in the basement. It will work out very nicely."

Kann Partners is the architect for the conversion, which is being designed to comply with federal guidelines for historic preservation. Becky Bass is the project architect and project manager for Kann, and Cass Gottlieb is the principal in charge. Plans call for the exterior to be cleaned and repointed where necessary, and for new uplighting to be installed to accentuate the building's architectural features. The Utz sign will stay on the roof.

Baltimore's zoning board approved the change in use last week. Khaled Said, a consultant to Piscatelli's group, Old Town Properties, LLC, told zoning commissioners that the hotel might be a Holiday Inn Express, but he said after the meeting that the operator has not been firmed up.

Other hotels planned for the same area are a 63-room Sleep Inn inside the former Furncraft building at 301 Fallsway, and an 11-story Cambria Suites hotel in place of the former Hillen Tire & Auto repair shop on the same block. Those hotels are being created by Roma Inns of Odenton.

Piscatelli said he expects his hotel to attract business travelers and tourists who want to be close to downtown and the Inner Harbor, as well as people visiting the growing Johns Hopkins medical campus in East Baltimore. Nightly room rates will start at about \$169.

The Old Town area has struggled in recent years, with vacant storefronts along Gay Street and a concentration of nonprofit organizations serving the homeless and indigent. The largest single investment has been the state's Juvenile Justice Center on Gay Street.

Piscatelli said he believes the area has strong potential for improvement, especially with plans under way to redevelop the former site of the Old Town Mall nearby. He's also enthusiastic about the suggestion made by several property owners that the city should take elevated portions of the Jones Falls Expressway down to street level to remove a barrier between the center city and Old Town - still only an idea at this point.

"It's a nice little peninsula just sitting there between downtown and Johns Hopkins. With three hotels in a row, that should be what the area needs to get kick-started."

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