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## Designs Done Developer Offers \$60 Million Plan For Front Street

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Even though the site is obscured by construction fences and a shroud of snow, the hoped-for future of Hartford's Front Street District came into focus Friday as developers told the state that they had completed their design phase and brought pictures to prove it.

More than two years after the state picked the HB Nitkin Group to develop the residential and entertainment district that is intended to link the Connecticut Convention Center with the rest of downtown, the developers presented their final designs Friday to the state.

The financing is close but not yet finalized, and there are still no tenants to announce — something that the developers said should change now that they have final designs to shop around.

Helen Nitkin, a principal in the HB Nitkin Group, told the board of the Capital City Economic Development Authority on Friday that the group was seeing "what we think is clearly the final form of what the project should look like and where it will go."

And, should it be built, what the \$60 million project will look like is this — ground-floor retail space that begins on Columbus Boulevard and wraps around the corner to bring more retail to Front Street, a central, one-way street that bisects the site.

Above the 65,000 square feet of what the architects call high-ceilinged, "large, glassy shop fronts" will be a total of 115 studios, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom apartments at roughly 550, 750 and 1,200 square feet, respectively. Behind them will be internal courtyards.

Apartment rents will be at market rates, which are now roughly double the square footage — so a 750-square-foot, one-bedroom apartment could go for \$1,500 a month.

The sidewalks will be wide, the streets will be tree-lined and the facades will be brick and stone.

None of the 65,000 square feet of retail space is yet spoken for, because Nitkin has decided to wait until this point to approach major potential tenants with a final design. "With many of these retailers, you might get one shot," she said.

The retailers will be restaurant- and entertainment-focused, with little emphasis



**Front Street District, looking northwest from Columbus Boulevard in Hartford.**

(Thomas Schaller for ROBERT A.M. STERN ARCHITECTS)

on shopping, Nitkin said. If there are non-restaurant shops, they would probably be a bookstore or a high-end clothier — the types of stores that cater to a business environment.

And Nitkin said that she's looking for a local mix.

"To just have national tenants would make it very dull," she said. "I think it's very important that we have local or regional restaurants and tenants there."

In addition to the one, existing parking garage on the site, the developers will also build a second, 400-space, four-level garage that fronts mainly on Arch Street. In the future, some of that frontage could be smaller retail shops, the developers said.

Bill McCue, the authority's chairman, said that he was encouraged by the drawings, the mix of apartments, the projected rents and the overall design.

But he understands that there could be some skeptics about the project's viability.

"Why wouldn't there be? We have not had success," he said, adding that "it's easy to be skeptical."

But, he said, "I feel as good about this as I have felt about Front Street, and it's been a challenge from the start. I'm very hopeful."

The task now, he said, is for HB Nitkin to deliver.

"We're hoping and depending upon them to be able to deliver [the project and

the tenants], and that seems, right now, like a good risk for us to take," McCue said.

The Front Street site has a long history that has featured a 19th-century commercial streetscape with stores on the ground level and apartments above. Later, it was the site of a gas works and a surface parking lot.

All that remain of the two large gas storage tanks on the site are two snow-filled craters that will be leveled off in time for springtime construction. The remediation work was begun this fall.

The state selected Nitkin in April 2005. Since then, Nitkin and the state spent time hammering out a deal — one that split Front Street's development into two phases — and Nitkin has been working to finish the design.

A year ago, when the state's deal with Nitkin was finalized, the developer anticipated a 2008 opening. A tax deal with the city mandates a late 2009 opening. But construction could well last into 2010, officials said.

The HB Nitkin Group isn't the first developer to try its hand at Front Street. Before Nitkin, there was Richard Cohen, a developer who failed to begin building after he signed an agreement in 2002 with the state. Cohen is suing the state for breach of contract. That suit is now 3 years old.

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