

Biz Buzz: Idle days may end for iconic structure

New owner plans to put the Farmers Alliance building back to work processing grapes

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After sitting empty for many years, Paso Robles' iconic Farmers Alliance building is on its way to once again processing the city's leading crop. This time, it's wine grapes.

The building originally used to process almonds — known for its landmark faded pink tower visible from Highway 101 — was the center of a controversy in 2006 when shopping chain Smart & Final was denied a permit to knock part of it down.

That year, the chain ended its plans to build a store there because executives said it was too expensive to maintain part of it within the historic guidelines.

The issue ended up going to the county's civil grand jury, which concluded that the city mishandled the company's application to develop the property.

After negotiating for more than a year, Smart & Final sold the space at 525 Riverside Ave. on Oct. 1 to Paso Robles-based Derby Wine Estates.

Escrow opened Sept. 1, said Ray Derby, who owns the winery with his wife, Pam Derby.

The property sold for an undisclosed sum, a Smart & Final spokesman confirmed last week.

The property was listed for \$1.75 million in April 2008.

"I have a soft spot in my heart for our history and our heritage, and I think the old building should be preserved wherever possible but also made productive as well," Ray Derby said of the building he began eyeing in 2009.

The Derbys will now seek city permits and propose their project to the City Council. Ray Derby hopes to open in 2012, "though that might be a little optimistic," he said.

Their plan is to keep within the national register requirements to keep the property true to its history.

The 11,250-square-foot mill was constructed in 1922, when Paso Robles had a booming almond industry. The nuts processed and bagged there helped to feed troops during World War II because the crop kept well without refrigeration, said Robert Tullock of the Paso Robles Historical Society.

The Farmers' Alliance Business Association purchased the building in 1936 and operated the warehouse until it closed the doors in 1975, according to a historical report on the building.

The building switched hands a couple of times over the next 10 years or so until a sheet rock company operated a contractors yard there from 1988 to 2009, the report says. The main building appears to have remained empty since at least 1985.

Bringing the building back to its original use — agriculture processing — is the next logical step for the space, Derby said.

He anticipates bottling 20,000 cases of wine there as the company grows, he said. Derby currently employs six people and has three estate vineyards in the North County and coast. He entered the industry as a grower in 2001 and now produces at Paso Robles Wine Services, making about 2,000 cases annually.

Before Derby had ideas for Paso Robles' landmark building, he wanted to build a large Mission-style winery off Highway 46 East.

However, that project was met with design pushback from the county and was discarded, Derby said.

— *Tonya Strickland*

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