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Brett Truett, owner of SoftNoze USA, stands in a second-floor doorway of the building, 10 Liberty Street in Utica, he has purchased. Truett plans to add new life to Bagg's Square through a clay-themed building project at the former warehouse property.

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Brett Truett, owner of 10 Liberty Street in Utica, stands in front of the building he purchased two years ago. He plans to create a pottery and arts complex on the site.

Entrepreneur to mold Bagg's Square with clay

Truett envisions artisan complex for warehouse

By Casey J. Dickinson

Journal Staff

UTICA — Entrepreneur Brett Truett practices urban revitalization in his spare time.

The owner of SoftNoze USA, Inc. plans to add new life to Bagg's Square through a clay-themed building project. He purchased 10 Liberty St. two years ago for \$40,000 and hopes to turn the 25,000-square-foot former warehouse property into an arts complex focused on pottery and other clay products. The project isn't moving rapidly, because SoftNoze takes up much of Truett's time.

"This is just a hobby for me," says Truett.

SoftNoze manufactures cushion-mounts for industrial sensors. The mounts protect the costly sensors from damage if they are struck by product moving down an assembly line.

Truett says he bought the building simply because he saw potential rather than to fulfill any specific vision. The vision took shape later when Hotel Utica owner Joseph Carucci and the hotel's director of sales and marketing, Jodie English suggested he speak with Mohawk Valley artist Richard Wohnsen. Wohnsen and other members of the Mohawk Valley's Ceramics Guild persuaded Truett to make clay the theme of a redevelopment project for his Bagg's Square building. Working with the Small Business Development Center at SUNYIT, the two developed a business plan for the complex. The plan includes retail shops, an art gallery, and a café. Other businesses could include a pottery-supply company.

"Most pottery these days is made by machine," says Truett, "We hope to be able to offer handmade pottery

at prices close to what consumers are paying for mass-produced items."

Utica was once home to White's Pottery, a world-famous maker of beer steins and other pottery products. Several collectors' sites on the Internet feature Utica-made pieces from the 19th century.

Truett is talking with banks and economic-development organizations about securing \$500,000 to convert his building into a multi-purpose center with a mix of retail shops, artist's work space, and loft apartments. The residential section, says Truett, may host "artists in residence" selected by an artistic committee composed of local art professors.

Truett has formed two corporations in anticipation of project funding, one to own the building and a second to operate the complex. The warehouse, which formerly housed Genesee Office Equipment, sat vacant for three years before Truett purchased it. He's put on a new roof, removed boards over the windows, replaced glass, and cleaned up the property over the past two years. Most of the project funds would go toward bringing the property up to current building codes, says Truett. A new sprinkler system and elevator for the four-story building are on the list of needed improvements. He hopes to secure financing over the next four months.

Truett says he can wait a while for the project to pay off, because it's more for the neighborhood than for any personal gain.

"I'm not looking for a fast return," he explains, "I'm trying to make something good happen." □

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