



Run up to the DeSoto Opening, Part I

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D.K. Row, The Oregonian
By

On Sunday, the DeSoto Project will have its public opening. I've a series of stories about the project and what it means. But to refresh your memory, I'm going to post several stories about the DeSoto, including the story that initially reported developer Jim Winkler's plans to create an art gallery hub on the North Park Blocks.

I've tracked the evolution of this project from the beginning and hope these stories offer some comprehensive context regarding the scope of Winkler's ambitious plan.

Here's the initial story, written some two years ago...



Jim Winkler

A PATTERN FOR A NEW ART HUB

By D.K. Row
The Oregonian
May 6, 2005

The graffiti-dotted former Daisy Kingdom building is on the verge of rebirth into what could be the city's most lucrative and busy art hub.

Last week, Jim Winkler finalized purchase of the empty building at 123 N.W. Eighth Ave. for about \$3.4

million. The developer responsible for turning the Bess Kaiser Hospital into Adidas Village, among other major building projects, has plans to transform the longtime fabric center into a retail art complex with multiple galleries similar to Los Angeles' Bergamot Station and buildings in New York's Chelsea district.

Plans for a gallery hub in Portland have been contemplated in the past by several prominent dealers, but this is the most serious attempt because of Winkler's expertise.

"There have been discussions before," says Elizabeth Leach, who bought a new space on Northwest Ninth Avenue last year. "But the difference is that you have an experienced developer leading the charge, not three or four galleries with no business experience. This is the most real attempt."

The impact of an art complex would be huge for both the Pearl District and the galleries. Several dealers, like Leach, have moved or are planning to move their businesses onto Northwest Ninth Avenue. Another major art presence one avenue away would re-announce the Pearl as the city's art gallery center, a notion that has been dismissed in recent years as the neighborhood has evolved into an area where the biggest appeals are upscale restaurants and stores. At the same time, major galleries pondered moves across the river.

For the galleries that eventually buy space in Winkler's building, being next to one another would be mutually beneficial. A critical mass of dealers makes it easier for visitors and collectors to see multiple shows -- and spend money.

"It's the same reason auto dealers line up on one major street," says Bob Kochs, owner of the Augen Gallery.

The building is also across the street from the historic U.S. Custom House, which is expected to become a tourist (and retail) focus when it is finally transformed into a boutique hotel.

As possible tenants, Winkler has invited what he considers the most serious Portland galleries -- "players who can take the art scene to the next level," he says. Those galleries include such established venues as The Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery and Blue Sky, Augen, Froelick, Pulliam Deffenbaugh, PDX and Laura Russo galleries.

After initially expressing interest, Pulliam Deffenbaugh and PDX are now collaborating to turn another space on Northwest Ninth Avenue into two separate galleries. But five on Winkler's list have signed nonbinding letters of intent -- Contemporary Crafts, Blue Sky, Augen, Froelick and Laura Russo.

"Everything is still in an ambiguous position," says Kochs. "Someone's got to put money down on the building and move forward."

Moving forward won't be cheap. Even though Winkler's plan includes historic tax credits for lower interest rates and below-market prices (roughly \$100 per square foot less than other high-end condo spaces in the Pearl) dealers will still have to pay sums that could reach \$1 million, depending on how big a piece they want of the 25,000 square feet of retail space.

The future of Blue Sky is partially spurring Winkler's ambitious plan. The wealthy 54-year-old developer has a respected profile in the art world as a photography collector and former Portland Art Museum trustee. But he's perhaps best known as Blue Sky's biggest supporter -- he recently made a donation to the museum with the stipulation that it use the money to buy one work from each monthly Blue Sky show.

Which is good because "we don't have any assets," says one of Blue Sky's co-founders, Christopher Rauschenberg.

Though Blue Sky's current landlord -- developer Al Solheim -- has always leased the nonprofit below market rates, Winkler and Rauschenberg wanted to cement the gallery's future.

"We've been here (in the current space) for 17 years," says Rauschenberg. "Prints have gotten bigger but we haven't. To be a property owner -- if we can do it -- that's a great deal."

If his plan to turn the building into a gallery hub doesn't work, Winkler says he's going to fill it with creative businesses. (He's already negotiating with several architectural and creative firms to fill space galleries don't.)

"If it falls through, it's not because I didn't try," Winkler said.

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