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## Developers take on tall project (video)

Astoria developers buy historic landmark

By **JOE GAMM and SANDRA SWAIN**  
*The Daily Astorian*

Like an aging monarch who has fallen on hard times, the John Jacob Astor Hotel reigns over downtown Astoria. Eight stories tall, with lightning rods reaching for the clouds, the Astor is by far the tallest building in the city.

Now the long neglected hotel is getting a new lease on life - thanks to Astoria developers Paul Caruana and Brian Faherty, who have purchased it from out-of-state owners.

The deal was set to close today.

Faherty, 44, and Caruana, 37, are veterans of historic building renovations. They are already renovating the Commodore Hotel, Norblad Building and Shark Rock Center.

The new purchasers are renaissance men who believe in the rebirth of downtown Astoria and are contributing greatly to it. They plan to allow the 66 residential tenants to remain and instead concentrate on sprucing up the lobby and storefront areas.

"We love the building. It's an emotional purchase," Caruana said.

He said it was important to have local ownership of the Astor Hotel - its previous owner, Washington, D.C., Limited Partnership was "layers removed from the property."

The previous owners refurbished part of the building in the 1980s. But they never touched the lobby or the mezzanine with its grand dining room. Those public areas were ornate and beautiful when the hotel opened in 1924. But they are now in an



**ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian**  
Astoria developers Brian Faherty, left, and Paul Caruana have purchased the John Jacob Astor Hotel. The Astor Hotel will be their fourth renovation project downtown, with restoration work currently under way at the Commodore Hotel, the Norblad Building and Shark Rock center office building.

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advanced state of disrepair, though vestiges of former grandeur remain.  
  
Caruana said the building had been a mystery to him for years.

But when you walk in, "You see kind of an era of amazing quality and craftsmanship," he said.

"It's almost like walking into the Titanic - you can see the glory of the era," Faherty added.

### History and allure

Tourtellotte and Hummel, a Portland architectural firm, designed the hotel with assistance from a local architect, Charles T. Diamond. It was the project of a group of businessmen who wanted Astoria to grow back quickly after the Great Fire of 1922 devastated downtown.

The Astor Hotel was built in 1923, and dedicated in 1924. At eight stories, it remains the tallest building in the city. Its Fur Trader Lounge was "once a dimly lit oasis for the tired businessman," wrote long-time Astoria resident Russell Dark for The Oregonian. The city government shut the hotel for safety reasons in the 1960s. It languished as taxes went unpaid for years. By the time he wrote his article sometime after 1968, Dark said the hotel had become a playpen for rats.

Salt Lake City, Utah, investors bought the hotel, remodeled it, and made its top six floors available for low-income housing in 1984. It has 59 low-income housing units and seven "market" units available.

Faherty and Caruana coveted the old Astoria landmark.

But to get the Astor, the men had to agree to buy the Julian Hotel in Corvallis as part of the deal.

"We wanted it so bad we were willing to buy the Julian too," Caruana said.

### New owners have history too

Faherty was a Portland real estate developer and broker for 17 years. He became known for restorations in Portland, but found a niche in reproducing old lighting fixtures. Instead of doing knock-offs, he wanted to produce authentic fixtures, the way they were produced 100 years ago.

Caruana had built a reputation for completing some of the finest restorations along the North Coast when Faherty hired him to build a house in Gearhart.

Faherty said his family was spending lots of time in Astoria, where historic parts of town caught their eyes.

"We needed to work on these old buildings as much as they needed us to work on them," Faherty said.

In just a few months, the three downtown buildings the men own will have restored awnings with new neon signs or lights shining through the night.

The top six floors of the Astor will continue to serve as low-income housing for the foreseeable future. Caruana said it has to stay that way because taxes would increase if the mix changed.

The first step for the Astor's restoration is to make the retail storefronts available for businesses.

"We love the building, but it doesn't generate the sort of income that allows us to paint and what have you," Caruana said.

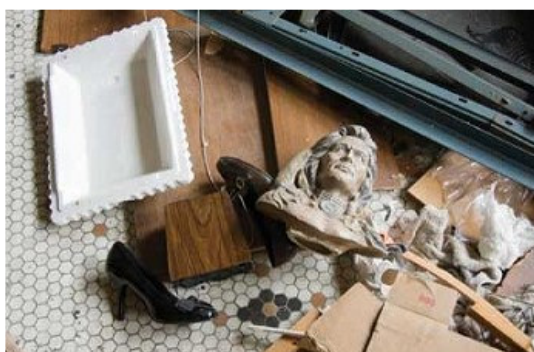
Faherty said with only one occupied storefront, the building looks dead on the main floor.

"The commercial units - that's part of the immediate plan," he said.

### A plan for the future

The team said the building has suffered from mismanagement for years.

"There's this whole notion in Astoria that people who own storefront buildings are slow to fix things up. They're willing to lower the rent," Faherty said. "Our idea is to take it back to the historic look and to make it more efficient. People come in and spend more on their business - not their building."



**ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian**  
A pair of mismatched shoes and a Native American statuette are among the oddities piled up on the tile floor of the Astor Hotel's grand ballroom.

Scroll down to see video of the Astor Hotel



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Caruana said many owners don't do enough. He believes they're missing out on the opportunity to own, improve and preserve historic properties.

"Just to put renters in at cheap rates, I don't know who that's helping," he said.

They want people to bring businesses to their buildings and be successful. But they also say what they do is selfish - they appreciate the significant architecture in Astoria.

They have already asked for help from John Goodenberger, Astoria's expert on historic buildings, to determine how best to finance the renovation - finding out whether there is federal, state, local or nonprofit money available.

They said preserving historic buildings can be difficult. Compromises might have to be made with codes, but never at the expense of safety. It takes problem-solving, they said.

"It makes us wonder, 'Is that why more people aren't doing more with storefronts?'" Faherty said. "It's a great thing for the city. We're trying to re-purpose these buildings. The city needs to help owners and developers figure out how to mitigate some of those issues."




He said the downtown renaissance reinforces the importance and significance of Astoria architecture.

"We get that!" Faherty said. "We think the generations to come are going to get that."



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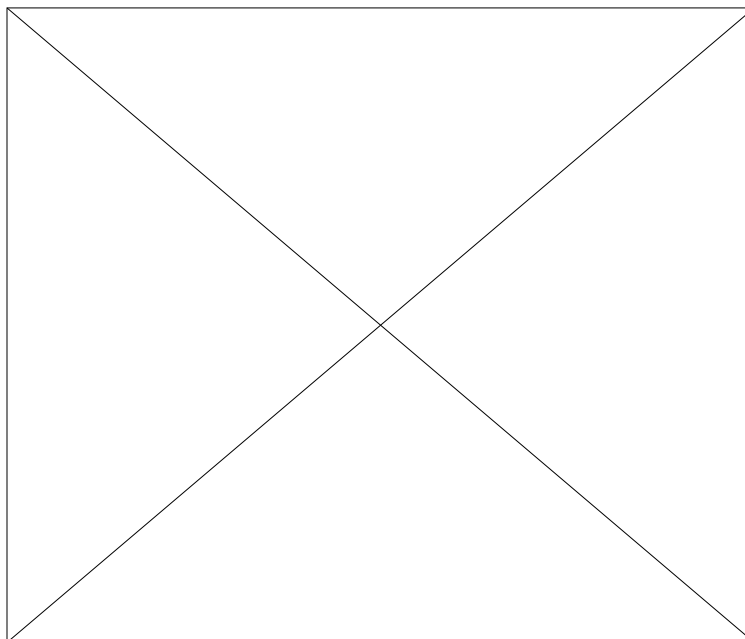
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## Reader Comments

Posted: Sunday, November 02, 2008  
 Article comment by: [Linda Katzberg](#)

How exciting that the Astor Hotel will be restored... I would love to talk to the guys that are in charge of the project. My family owned the hotel in the 60's and I have great memories of the old hotel.... My brother and I explored all areas of the hotel. We lived on the mezanime floor for a while. We were there to experience the Columbus day storm. My brother and his wife ran the Fur Trader, my older sister ran the coffee shop, my mom ran the front desk and the switchboard, my dad was the owner.. My other sister, my brother and I just ran all over the place. There were alot of big name people stay at the hotel and many fancy banquets and events in the ballroom on the mezanine floor. What a glorius time it was for us.

Linda (Haines) Katzberg

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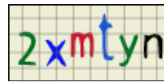
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