

NEWS

'It was worth it': After fire destroyed 14 William St., David Walch chose to rebuild the century-old Worcester home



Jeff A. Chamer

Telegram & Gazette

Published 5:00 a.m. ET June 25, 2022

WORCESTER — If David Walch were able to go back and choose between rebuilding the fire-damaged house at 14 William St. or demolishing it, he would likely choose the latter.

“Maybe in hindsight, I would have knocked it down, to be honest ... It was more difficult to demo it basically piece-by-piece,” Walch said. “Brick-by-brick, stud-by-stud, and mitigating mold and that sort of thing. It was very costly.”

After assessing internal and external damage of a fire caused by a faulty heater in February 2021, Walch, who purchased the building later that year, chose to rebuild. He mapped a renovation blueprint for the multifamily home, determined to return it to its original external look.

He saw potential in the century-old, seven-unit building.

He met with the seller to discuss the building and to put together a deal. On Dec. 1, according to property records, Walch purchased the home for \$315,000.

“Oftentimes, with these old mansions that are chopped up into multiple units, there are problems with the livability of the floor plans, there's structural problems to the old buildings,” Walch said. “Problems that, if you were gonna build the building today, you wouldn't build it like that.”

While cleanup of the site had started shortly after he purchased it in December, construction had to be delayed in January and February due to the weather, he said.

By March, construction finally began and the building has already undergone significant changes internally to add more space.

Fire sprinklers were added throughout the building, which he said not only makes it a safer place for people to live, he said, but also allowed them to get rid of the rear stairwell.

“If a building is only three stories or less, and it's fully fire sprinkled, then you can actually get rid of the rear stairwell,” Walch said. “The rear stairwell was very narrow. It's not a great access point for the apartments anyway, and so we turned those rear stairwells to make bigger kitchen-living room areas.”

Skylights added

Walch said that the building originally had a narrow spiral-type staircase going between the second and third floor, which has since been removed. He also put in landings for the front stairway to make it “more usable.”

In an effort to bring in more natural light, a 4-foot-by-4-foot skylight was added to the top of the building, he said.

“When you enter the unit from the second floor going up, you look up 18-feet and see a huge skylight,” he said.

Walch also said he has added all electricity in the structure to make it a green building.

“We're using a high-efficient hybrid heat pump and the Mass Save program has been helpful in doing that...and we're also doing 100% spray foam insulation,” he said. “100% of the building will be spray foam, so it'll be a very energy efficient and tight building.”

He has made other safety updates to the building as well, such as eliminating all lead paint, as well as using a lightweight concrete between floors called gypcrete.

Construction is expected to continue through December, with January being slated for tenant occupancy, Walch said.

"I still think there'll be affordable rents that we can achieve but marketplace rents are really the way that makes this project work," he said.

"Sometimes the Section 8 gets so far behind, it just is hard to make financial sense, especially on a project like this where the cost of materials has increased dramatically from when we started the project to when we'll finish the projects," Walch said.

He said that as long as Section 8 rents are "even close to the market" then "that's definitely a consideration."

Solid structure

Although the structure of the building was damaged by the fire, Walch said that it was "actually pretty good."

"The outside structure has those old 160-year-old wood, which is the true two-by-four, meaning it's 2 inches by 4 inches, not an inch and a half by 3.5 inches. It's hard old wood," he said.

He said that he also likes that the building has a granite foundation instead of old field that is "cobbled together."

While the building will not be exactly as it once was, Walch said he has been trying to ensure it receives renovations that make it more livable while also restoring its appearance, working with the Worcester Historical Commission to execute his business plan.

"I've done my fair share of projects and dealt in cities across Massachusetts and Michelle Johnstone with the historic committee has been one of the most responsive and reasonable and good professionals within a municipality that I've ever dealt with," he said.

After putting together what he said he felt was "a very reasonable proposal," the historic committee, he said, was responsive, helpful and accommodating in executing his business plan.

Walch is also in the process of purchasing 12 Alpine St., another building that had been damaged by a fire and that he hopes to renovate and restore.

"These buildings, they weren't terribly livable, if you asked me my opinion at least," he said. "I'm investing a great deal of money between the two properties, almost \$2 million into the city of Worcester."

He said that if the "climate" for the building department, historical society and historical commission keep being "reasonable and responsive," then he'll continue to invest money and "enjoy doing business."

Walch said that purchasing and restoring this structure is part of a long-term plan and that he hopes to be able to pass this down to his children, who he envisions will manage it responsibly when they inherit it from him eventually.

"Despite the increased costs, I still feel like it was worth it...I'm not selling it, I'm not flipping it...this is not a short-term plan for me," he said. "This has always been a very long-term idea, long-term strategy ... I just want people to know that I plan on being a good neighbor for a long time."