

GOVERNMENT SPENDING

Unique artist space discovers new life

Investment helps commercial complex thrive in Dayton.

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Krysten Smith, manager of the Front Street buildings, says “eclectic” is the watchword at the buildings’ community of artists and mechanics. THOMAS GNAU PHOTOS /STAFF

A complex of historic Dayton industrial buildings is proving to be a haven for local artists, even as it gets a new lease on life.

The Dayton-Montgomery County Port Authority Board of Trustees last month approved a \$300,000 loan to the company overseeing the Front Street buildings, a commercial complex that bills itself as “the largest community of artists and artisans in the Dayton area.”



A connecting structure is found between two of the buildings in the Front Street complex, above East Second Street.

“It’s just a very eclectic community,” said Krysten Smith, who helps manage the trio of buildings straddling East Second and Front streets. “There’s a whole variety of different types of art that we do here — from painters to sculptors, jewelers to woodworkers, screening printers, photographers.”

The Port Authority’s loan will cover just over half of the expected \$510,077 cost of replacing a 45-year-old heating boiler for the complex at 1001 E. Second St. Citywide Development, the city of Dayton’s private development arm, is expected to cover the rest, Brad

Evers, port authority counsel, said recently.

Chris Meyer, account manager for Tipp City’s Energy Optimizers USA, approached the Port Authority for the financial help.

The old steam boiler required full-time oversight by an engineer when it was operated, mostly in



Krysten Smith, Front Street Buildings manager, and Chris Meyer of Energy Optimizers USA agree: There’s no place quite like Front Street. THOMAS GNAU / STAFF

and around business hours between November and April. Continuing that oversight, and continuing to fix the boiler, was too expensive an option.

“They had a room with an open window in the brick, so they (the monitoring engineer) could look in,” Meyer said.

The area is known for open-air art studios and outdoor markets. Stroll through the red brick structures, and it’s easy to see how unique it is. Tall windows give painters’ studios plenty of light. Eighteen-foot-high ceilings hover overhead. A cargo elevator doesn’t quite look like it will move — until it does.

“You go over there, and you see this space has an interesting feel to it,” Port Authority Executive Director Jerry Brunswick said.

Meyer said the investment is being structured as a PACE project, where the cost of new energy equipment is repaid for up to 20 years via an assessment added to a property’s tax bill.

The new heating units are on order and are expected to be delivered before Christmas, Meyer said. They will be installed after winter.

Built in the late 1800s and early 1900s, much of the complex once was a paper mill, the former home of International Envelope. The building is owned by Front Street Building LLC, a company formed by Zimmer and Katherine Miller in 2001. Zimmer Miller, who worked in construction and real estate, died in 2006 at 87.

The buildings are full, and there’s a waiting list of would-be tenants.

“It’s 100 percent full, which is an amazing thing in Dayton,” Meyer said. “Not only that, she has a waiting list.”

Plenty of prospective tenants are “amazed” at the what they see on Front Street, Smith said.

“That’s really what we’re trying to do — just get that word out there, to get everybody to see what the hidden gem in the Gem City is,” she said.

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