

## Legion plans new branch in apartment building

Author of the article:

**Brian Kelly**

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Rendering of planned apartment building at Royal Canadian Legion Branch 25's Great Northern Road site.

Royal Canadian Legion Branch 25 will demolish its 54-year-old structure on Great Northern Road and put up a nine-storey apartment building with a new branch on the ground floor at the same site.

Construction cost is estimated at \$22 to \$25 million with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., expected to put up the cash for construction. That money will be paid back by Branch 25 and Veterans Housing, made up of Sal-Dan Construction and three to four partners. Veterans Housing will be the building's property managers. Confirmation of financing is expected in 30 to 60 days, Sal-Dan president Sam Biasucci told The Sault Star following an announcement Friday morning at the legion. Project work will start shortly after confirmation of CMHC support.

Sal-Dan will construct the building. Branch 25 will own the slightly more than two acres of land and structure. Profit after expenses will be split equally between Branch 25 and Veterans Housing, said legion president Helen Stewart.

"This is a unique, fresh, brand-new model, unique to Sault Ste. Marie," said Matt Shoemaker, Branch 25's legal counsel.

Legion members and veterans will have priority for 107 single bedroom, two bedroom and two bedroom plus den units. Thirty-five units will be geared to income. Rental prices are to be announced. The legion's membership of nearly 600 includes about 250 veterans.

Branch 25 anticipates earning an estimated \$80,000 to \$100,000 per year from apartment rentals. How that money will be used is up to the legion executive. The dollars could be put to Branch 25 programs such as sports and youth education, said Stewart.

Branch 25 will be based at Marconi Cultural Event Centre for 18 to 24 months during construction. Tentative occupancy date of the new site at 96 Great Northern Rd., is spring 2023.

"It's just going to be a nice place for vets to come and just be comfortable and be welcomed," said Stewart.

Branch 25 will have slightly more than 10,000 square feet on the new building's ground floor. A hall and bar will have seating for 200. A front lobby and physical plant requirements including mechanical and communications rooms will also be on that level. There will be underground parking for more than 50 vehicles. Additional outdoor parking will be available, as now, at the rear of the property.

Biasucci wants to train several veterans in the skilled trades, including painting, drywall finisher and electrician, during construction.

"Once you acquire a skill it can serve you well for a long time," he said.

The president of Algoma Veterans Association is hopeful the legion's new space will offer more room for services, such as reiki, chiropractic and massage therapy for former members of the Canadian military.

“We’re trying to get as many professionals as we can to come in,” said Frank Iezzi. “The way to help veterans is to try and bring the professionals here that will help them get through the day. We have veterans that don’t want to leave their homes or their apartments. In their own environment, with other veterans in the building, 100 per cent that’ll be great for them.”

A memorial tower, similar to one that stands on Queen Street East next to GFL Memorial Gardens, will be on the building’s roof.

“A lot of traffic goes by here,” said Stewart. “A memorial tower will keep it in somebody’s vision.”

Biasucci has wanted to partner with Branch 25 for about 30 years. His most recent effort is more than two years in the making.

CMHC has helped Branch 25 with about \$160,000 in seed money for the project.

A monument to the Wawanosh Home for Girls will remain near the intersection of Great Northern Road and Willoughby Street. An inscription at the monument’s front will be copied at its rear where a bench will be placed and pergola erected.

Branch 25 has tried to sell its building on Great Northern Road “on and off” since the 1990s, said Stewart. The legion can meet expenses, but not the price tag to replace costly infrastructure, including heating, ventilation and air conditioning units.

“There’s no money for that,” said Stewart.

A unit of the Great War Veterans’ Association was organized at 517 Queen St. E., in 1918. The GWVA was absorbed by Canadian Legion in 1928.

A similar redevelopment is planned less than a kilometre north of Branch 25. A seven-storey apartment building and place of worship will replace Holy Trinity Anglican Church and four townhouses on Northern Avenue. City council approved a rezoning request for the project in January.

btkelly@postmedia.com

On Twitter: @Saultreporter