

Condo project at former Salem court breaks ground

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JAIME CAMPOS/Staff photo

A rendering of what Brix Condominiums will look like once complete was on display during the ceremony.



JAIME CAMPOS/Staff photo

Real estate developer Merrill Diamond speaks Friday about Brix Condominiums, a 61-unit housing project being built at the former Salem District Court.



JAIME CAMPOS/Staff photo

Mayor Kim Driscoll addresses attendees during a groundbreaking ceremony Friday for Brix Condominiums, a housing project that will be built at the former Salem District Court on Washington Street.

SALEM — The brick-built district courthouse on Washington Street is coming down and being replaced... by Brix.

Diamond Sinacori and Urban Spaces, a development team behind the joint venture 65 Washington St. LLC, broke ground Friday on Brix Condominiums, the 61-unit condo project that will be built on the site of the former District Court at the corner of Washington and Federal streets.

“This is part of an integral effort to transform this northern part of our downtown and this entryway to the downtown, and we’re thrilled to see this part of it starting today,” said Mayor Kim Driscoll.

The project was initially pitched in 2015 but faced a series of delays largely due to soil contamination and at least one empty fuel storage tank found buried at the site.

The contamination dates back to an old “lubritorium,” an automotive service business that operated on the site during the 1930s and '40s.

The state later bought the property and built the courthouse in 1976. It closed in 2012, when the J. Michael Ruane Judicial Center opened down the road on Federal Street, and has been vacant since.

The new Brix Condominiums will have 61 condos, with a mix of one to three bedrooms. Affordable units are packed into the project as well, according to Sinacori principal Merrill Diamond.

There will also be a rooftop terrace, fitness center, library, and other amenities for tenants.

At the groundbreaking, Diamond said the companies “gave a lot of thought to what this building should be, and we went from one end to the other.

“Should it be something like Peabody Essex? Should it be a monument to the new Salem, something that’s deliberately out of context? And certainly it works for Peabody Essex Museum, but we thought, ‘does it make sense here?’” Diamond said. “We went the other way — ‘should we do something so derivative that it’ll look like so many buildings that try to look historic too?’”

Ultimately, the companies focused on “transitional design,” Diamond said.

“We wanted a building that, in one hand, looked like it fit on this site, that it was built to fit on this site,” Diamond said. “We wanted it to evoke both the history of Salem and the tradition of Salem, in terms of its materials and detailing, but also speaking to a new Salem with a new housing type that’s being offered in downtown Salem.”

The next step is demolition of the former District Court. That will provide a challenge for the city, as Salem heads into the peak months of its tourism season. Demolition of the building had been planned for late spring but has been steadily pushed back.

Now, the company is trying to keep the work happening outside of the Haunted Happenings season. Demolition will require one lane of Washington Street as well as Church Street — two heavily traveled roads in October — to be shut down.

“We’re working closely with the city. We’ve got some other things to do — capping, utilities. There’s a recommendation that it’ll be done in concert with the demolition,” Merrill said. “We’re going to do everything we can to make sure we don’t interfere with Halloween.”