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Downtown tower plan boasts 'organic' hotel

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A Coral Springs, Fla.-based company plans to operate a 200-room, high-end hotel atop the \$70 million development slated for the former Federal Reserve property downtown.

Vantage Hospitality Group's Lexington Collection intends to put a four-star project in the top eight floors of the 18-story office and hotel tower planned for the site at the corner of Fourth Avenue North and 18th Street.

"The Lexington Collection in Birmingham is a celebration of the vibrant, historical city," said Steve Belmonte, chief executive of the Lexington Collection.

Roseville, Minn.-based InnWorks Inc. has been tapped as the hotel management company on the project. The company is working with developers on the hotel's design.

Savannah, Ga.-based Melaver Inc. is spending \$20 million to renovate the vintage-1926 Federal Reserve building and annex on Fifth Avenue North. The company will invest another \$50 million constructing the new office and hotel tower, a parking deck and connecting the two buildings.

As currently designed, the project calls for 125,000 square feet of office space. A portion is slated for restaurants, shops and even a spa. Two floors are expected to be used for executive condominiums for companies to house associates visiting from out of town.

Like the rest of the development, the hotel will be designed to U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Environment and Energy Design standards. The building will be designed to use 30 percent less energy than typical projects and likely as much as 50 percent less energy than the current downtown offices. Non-toxic paints and finishes and enhanced ventilation are also part of the design.

"From inception, this hotel and retail project has been designed as a model for environmentally sound practice," said Teresa Matsui Sanders, president of InnWorks. "The energy and comfort features greeting guests will be cutting edge in every way."

Colin Coyne, who is overseeing the project for Melaver, said his firm chose Lexington and InnWorks because they shared the vision for the project.

"The dominant reason was freedom to have the ability to create an organic hotel to Birmingham from a design standpoint and an operations standpoint," Coyne said.

Vantage, which calls itself the 12th largest hotel operator, has had success running other hotel types and launched the Lexington Collection brand earlier this year to target the higher end of the market. It operates Lexington hotels in Orlando, Kissimmee, Fla., and Kerhonkson, N.Y.

Coyne said that is in keeping with what Melaver wants in the development.

"We want this to be a project of national stature," he said.

Coyne said a number of companies have expressed interest in leasing space in the development's office portion. Pre-leasing will dictate when construction on the office and hotel tower will start, though it could open in 2008 or 2009 if a major tenant takes a majority of the space.

A name for the hotel has not been determined, but the final name will include the tag line "a Lexington Collection hotel."

The Lexington Collection hotel will be part of a downtown hotel boom. Nearly \$100 million is being spent to build new or renovate existing hotel rooms, according to Operation New Birmingham. In addition to the 200 slated for the Federal Reserve site, another 1,300 rooms are in the other projects.

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