

Past Blends With the Future in Keystone Business Center

By Gene O. Morris

Like many Main Street hotels, the Keystone in McCook was fading into obscurity. In fact, there was a chance the six-story building would be torn down because of leaks, crumbling walls and years of disuse.

But, when almost all hope was gone, the tallest business building in Southwest Nebraska was transformed from an aging, abandoned townhouse into a multi-purpose center for business and industry.

Now open for all to see and use, the 40,000 square foot structure is a blend of the past and the present with an eye on the future.

The transformation of the Keystone started taking place in 2005 when Rex Nelson, executive director of the McCook Economic Development Corp., suggested to Matt Stebbins that 21st Century Systems, Inc. consider the then vacant former hotel as a potential expansion site.

The off-the-cuff remark set off a surprisingly supportive chain of events. In the course of the next six years, the Keystone project received more than \$2 million in funding from the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Commerce Department; a loan guarantee of \$750,000 from a consortium of McCook banks; \$1.1 million in future funding from the McCook economic development sales tax; and money for furnishings, equipment and programming from U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development.

And, on top of all that, the anchor tenant, 21 CSI, received a grant award from the Community Development Block Grant program.

Once the funding assurances were received the project moved forward, with the \$4.2 million rehabilitation and remodeling work directed by EAD Constructors of Omaha with the aid of dozens of sub-contractors and suppliers, including 21 firms from the McCook area.

Together, the funding partners and the construction workers turned the old hotel into an emerging business center. The initial changes are concentrated on the first through fourth floors, with future expansion targeted for the fifth and sixth floors and basement.

Throughout there is an emphasis on historic preservation. This becomes immediately apparent upon entering the front door, with the lobby looking much as it did when the Keystone first opened for business in 1922.

But there are essential modern changes, too, including the new elevator which carries people and packages to all seven levels of the structure.

The first floor also features two businesses, American Family Insurance on the south and Madison's, a lunchroom, on the north. Also on the ground level is the elegant banquet and ballroom, available for rental for parties of up to 100 people.

The second floor also has an historic appearance because of the railing which gives an overhead look at the lobby. In addition, the second floor features the offices of Maury Green, Attorney at Law, and the McCook Area Chamber of Commerce.

The third floor, all redone, is the location of the offices of the McCook Department of Economic Development and the McCook Housing Department, as well as staffing space for McCook Community College and other organizations providing services to businesses.

A training room, business incubation space and a conference room are also available on the second and third floors, including five to seven spaces for use as business and professional offices.

The fourth floor is the domain of 21st Century Systems, which is committed to adding 21 employees in the next two years, while the fifth and sixth floors are reserved for future expansion.

"The Keystone project had three major components which captured the attention of the Economic Development Administration," Nelson said. "The Commerce officials liked the fact that the Keystone rehabilitation would help with the expansion of 21 CSI and provide a place for business incubation and support of local entrepreneurship. But, perhaps of greatest importance, they saw the Keystone project as a major step in the direction of Main Street preservation and downtown development."

Looked at that way, the Keystone Business Center could become more than a new start for an old building. It could become a model for Main Streets all across America.