

Developers take chance on Whiting



JANUARY 10, 2016 9:30 AM • [ED BIRSCHENK](#)
EDWIN.BIRSCHENK@NWI.COM, (219) 933-4195

WHITING — After trying to sell developers on the potential of this small community, architect Thomas Vavrek may have found what was being served up at a local diner a bit hard to swallow.

It wasn't the food. It was the opinion offered by a waitress that rental prices of \$1,000 or more a month weren't going to fly in the city.

"You're not going to get anybody to pay that type of rent in Whiting," she said.

Despite the waitress' skepticism, the developers moved on with the City Place apartment building at 1518 119th St. and the units "got snapped up right away," said Vavrek, whose Vavrek Architects designed the structure that also contains 6,000 square feet of commercial and retail space.

MVP Builders, LLC, whose partners include Chicago developers Enrico Plati and Bob Berry, are now looking to build a mixed used development in the 1400 block of 119th Street, with six to seven apartments on the top floors and a couple of commercial ventures on the ground floor. They also plan to construct six residential condominiums and one commercial condominium at the former site of the Moose Lodge at 1548 W. 119th Street. Both are expected to be finished this year.

Plati recalls coming to the area to meet with contractor Ray Matesevac, who he had worked with on other projects, when he said he "discovered a jewel that I did not know existed."

He cited a number of factors that attracted him to the area, including the proximity to Chicago and the beauty of the lakefront, especially with the improvements that have been made there under Mayor Joe Stahura's administration. Plati praised the administration as being "very progressive" and pro-development.

Vavrek said there aren't really any similar apartment units in Whiting to those found in City Place. He characterized the ones that were in the city as dated facilities.

And despite the waitress' concern about the rental price, Plati said developers are actually delivering value when it comes to the Whiting units. He said comparable units in Chicago would probably cost 2 1/2 times as much.

The planned condominiums would be a first for Whiting, according to Vavrek and Plati. Both talked about Whiting being a safe community that is attractive to families with children as well as younger people.

Vavrek said the community has a strong sense of self and there are always events going on in the city. He also said it is a "walkable" community there people can trek by foot to the grocery store or bank.

Vavrek said the success of the apartment project has attracted the attention of other developers. Plati said his group is absolutely looking to do additional developments in the town.

"We are not investing so much of our time and energy without an eye to the future, both our own and Whiting's," said Plati.

Stahura's administration has been slowly acquiring about 120 properties around the Oil City Stadium that it hopes to eventually see developed into commercial, retail and residential units. Stahura said the officials try to acquire a few contiguous properties at a time so there is sufficient land to make it suitable for development. He has said in the past he would like to have some apartments and condominiums in town that can be used for the young professionals working at the nearby BP refinery.

"The whole goal would be to have a diversified housing market," Stahura said.

He also has been working to get some rental senior housing that can be used for residents who may be ready to transition from the larger homes they own. Stahura cited some challenges in trying to get such a project going. He said it needs to be a larger development to be profitable and also located nearby the downtown area so older residents can easily walk to the stores and offices there.