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## UA's century-old Martin University Center may become a 60-70 room hotel

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A glorious old building on the eastern edge of the University of Akron campus may be transformed into a boutique hotel with some 60 to 70 guest rooms.

Cleveland developers Joe Shafran and Tom Chema, former president of Hiram College, have proposed redeveloping the century-old Martin University Center building at 105 Fir Hill and turning it into lodging that would cater to the university as well as the community.

The Martin University Center — a brick and concrete structure with a front balcony supported by pillars — closed in 2013.

Over the years, with its banquet hall and luncheon restaurant, the center served as the site of university and community functions.

“This gives us the opportunity to have [the developers] repurpose a structure that we weren’t going to make an investment in ... aren’t in the position to,” said Nathan Mortimer, UA’s vice president for finance and administration.

City officials also are pleased to see the project taking shape.

“We’d love to see the Martin Center preserved, renovated and restored,” city Planning Director Jason Segedy said Friday.

“Having more options for visitors who are coming to the area and want to stay in Akron is important,” he said.

Chema said the proposal calls for an addition on the back of the 40,000-square-foot building that would complement the existing structure and house about half

of the 60 to 70 guest rooms.

Chema, who led the development of downtown Cleveland's baseball park and basketball arena, said it was too soon to disclose a projected cost of the project, except to say it would be more than \$10 million.

"There's so many moving parts" to the plan, he said.

Shafran, who could not be reached for comment, is perhaps best known for transforming a mansion in Cleveland's University Circle into the Glidden House boutique hotel.

The Akron plan is for "a project that will be a benefit to the university, the downtown and the community, and hopefully we'll make some money on it," said Chema, who knows the Martin University Center from having attended various functions there.

Chema noted he knew philanthropist Paul E. Martin, for whom the center is named. Martin, who died in 2010, was a successful auto dealer, and as his businesses prospered, he made a point of giving his money away, especially to higher education. Over the years he donated more than \$7 million to UA. He also gave money to Hiram College, among other organizations.

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### **Center history**

The Martin University Center building, designed by local architectural firm Harpster & Bliss, was constructed in 1916-1918 as a private club. The UA Foundation purchased it in 1978, after the club's membership had significantly declined, and UA's development staff located its offices there.

In 2013, those offices moved to office space at InfoCision Stadium. Around that time, a now former UA official suggested razing the Martin Center building.

But in 2014, UA sought proposals from "qualified organizations" for repurposing the building.

It was unclear last week if the university received any responses to its 2014 request.

Mortimer said last week that UA is “working toward” a 40-year ground lease with the developers, who have formed Martin House LLC for the Martin University Center project.

A ground lease would allow Martin House LLC to redevelop the building while UA retained ownership. Mortimer declined to reveal financial terms of the proposed deal. Any lease would need approval from UA’s board of trustees.

The building is across from the Hower House Museum, a 28-room Victorian mansion that was donated to UA in 1970.

### **Preserving buildings**

On Friday, Akron’s planning commission recommended that the building be designated as a local historic landmark. On Monday, Akron City Council will consider the granting the designation. Such designation is needed to be eligible for state tax credits that are used to help fund the improvement of historic properties. Chema said the project is slated to receive federal tax credits.

The hotel closest to the university — and the only one in downtown Akron — is the 146-room Courtyard by Marriott, which opened in 2016 in the Northside district.

Also downtown, Akron developer Tony Troppe is working to turn the United Building at Market and Main streets into a 71-room hotel called the Blu-tique.

The proposed Martin University Center redevelopment comes as UA is working to get state approval to transfer ownership of the historic old St. Paul Church structure, with the goal of preserving it.

Dana Noel, president of nonprofit Progress Through Preservation, which has long been concerned about preserving the former church on the UA campus, said earlier this month that he knows of another area group interested in possibly restoring and moving into the old church.

Mortimer has said he is working with the state’s Department of

Administrative Services to have legislation drafted that would allow the property to be transferred through a bid process. He said he can't guarantee that any specific group would end with it.

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