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Renderings of the proposed rooftop pool and restaurant at 1801 Assembly Street, the former Veterans Administration office building in Columbia where a developer wants to create an 88-unit apartment building. City of Columbia/Provided.

Apartments in historic VA building moving ahead despite pause on Finlay Park rehab

BY JESSICA HOLDMAN
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The Capital City's planned overhaul of downtown Finlay Park might be on hiatus, but redevelopment of the area's former Veterans Administration office into high-end apartments is moving forward.

The project, first announced in July, includes 88 one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments in the five-story building at the corner of Assembly and Laurel streets. Renovations also would add commercial space, a rooftop bar, pool and a banquet area, according to documents filed with the Columbia Design/Development Review

Commission. Plans show a "speakeasy" style bar, coworking space and a health club with fitness studio.

Delays due to the coronavirus pandemic put the project about six months behind schedule, said Alex Cole, a spokesman for the development company Global Ocean Investments. The company plans to start construction this summer.

"This will be a luxurious development," Cole said of the project dubbed The Federal.

Granite countertops and high-end fixtures will come standard in the apartments, which will go for \$1,000 per month for a one-bedroom unit.

"It will have a lot of European flair as

well," Cole said, a nod to its new owner.

The project fits in with a wave of redevelopment in the area at the north end of the Vista entertainment district and along one of the city's main corridors, with officials planning an \$18 million, long-overdue face-lift for Finlay Park and repurposing of underutilized space in the large Assembly Street post office building.

The developer of the former VA building is Justin Etzin of Global Ocean Investments, a diplomat who previously served for 12 years as consul general and tourism ambassador to the United States from the Republic of Seychelles, an archipelago off

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Columbia seeks state money for convention center expansion

BY MIKE FITTS
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The proposal to expand the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, put on the back burner since the coronavirus pandemic, is gaining momentum again even as travel slowly recovers from the virus' economic effects.

One sign of the proposal's revival: Gov. Henry McMaster proposed spending \$15 million on the project in his executive budget of released earlier this month.

The Legislature takes the lead on allocating state dollars, but the governor's request of one-time money shows how serious backers of the project are about getting it moving again.

Other communities including Greenville and Charleston have received similar boosts for their visitor-boosting attractions from the state budget in recent years; now they are hoping Columbia can benefit.

Their hope is that the \$60 million public investment, with the city and Richland County handling the rest of the cost, would spur multiple private projects including three high-end hotels on adjacent land. The end result, they hope, is the creation of a major draw for more visitors to Columbia's downtown.

The reasons to expand are the same now as they were a year ago, according to former Columbia Mayor Bob Coble, an attorney at Nexsen Pruet. Coble was the mayor of Columbia when the convention center

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