

Carlton, Common Plea plan makeovers

Tough year for restaurants doesn't deter big projects

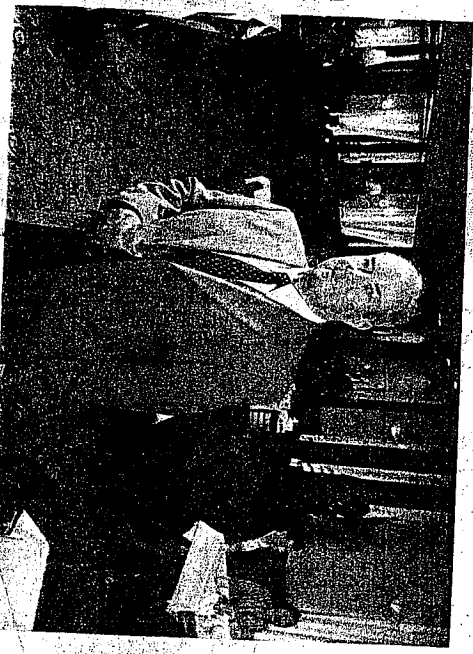
BY TIM SCHOOLEY

Two of Downtown Pittsburgh's most respected and longest-running restaurants are mulling major upgrades.

After reaching a deal on a 10-year lease this past summer, Kevin Joyce is seeking bids from general contractors to remodel The Carlton Restaurant, an establishment located in BNY Mellon Center that is celebrating 25 years in business.

At the same time, John Barsotti has an informal agreement to move his Common Plea, a 35-year fine-dining establishment a few blocks away, from its longtime location on Ross Street into the new Hilton Garden Inn hotel that Hartman-based Kratsa Properties is working to develop across the street.

Joyce emphasized the remodeling project, the first for the restaurant since 1997, is both



Owner Kevin Joyce is accepting bids to remodel The Carlton Restaurant, a six-figure project that will include updated mechanics and a new look.

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RESTAURANTS: Common Plea considers move into planned Downtown hotel

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necessary and fraught with risk, given the difficult economy.

"We've had a great 25-year run," he said. "But if you had to make a decision based solely on the last 18 months, you'd think we were crazy to do what we're doing."

A major portion of the project will be devoted to upgrading the restaurant's mechanics and engineering. That includes ripping up the restaurant's kitchen floor and replacing its leaky plumbing, as well as improving its air conditioning.

But Joyce, who hired Strada Architecture LLC to design the project, also plans to remodel the restaurant and its lounge

with new lighting, carpeting, wall-coverings and other aspects of the decor. Given the need to dig into the space's floor to reach the plumbing, Joyce plans to close the restaurant during the slow season of next summer for what he expects will be a six-figure project in order to be up and running in fall 2010.

"When we open, we hope it reignites the buzz a little bit," Joyce said. The Carlton has been named a Distinguished Restaurant of North America, among other awards, as it attempts to maintain sales volumes through ongoing growth in competition.

Barsotti's plans are still tentative, as the hotel project has yet to be built. In July,

Allegheny County sold the half-acre formerly occupied by the jail annex to Kratsa Properties for \$1.55 million. Kratsa has announced plans to build a 165-room, seven-story hotel on the site at a total development cost of \$28 million.

But he has a casual understanding with Kratsa Properties to move the Common Plea into a new 5,000-square-foot space in the hotel once it opens, an opportunity that would bring with it a chance to operate a more efficient restaurant on one level, with better banquet space and energy savings due to the newly built space.

"This particular property was very highly touted by everybody for the need

for additional rooms Downtown, and its proximity to the new arena and the political community," said Barsotti of the hotel. "It would give us the potential to increase our volume."

Terri Sokoloff, a principal of Specialty Group, a Ross-based restaurant services firm, said even the best restaurants need to revamp with a new vision to keep up with competition.

"When they're that long running, you tend to want to go to something newer because it's fresher," she said of the importance of presentation and ambience. "It's not all about the food. It's how you plate it."

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