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**REAL ESTATE**

## **Reshaping a piece of downtown**

By David Ortiz,  
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Two years after the national real estate and hotel management company The Procaccianti Group announced its ambition to acquire and develop a “power block” of marquee properties surrounding a renovated Dunkin’ Donuts Center and the R.I. Convention Center in downtown Providence, the plan is taking shape.

On Aug. 1, the Cranston-based developer began demolition of the city’s former police and fire headquarters across the street from the Dunk in La Salle Square, which it will turn into a surface parking lot while designs are drawn and approved for a new mixed-use office tower with street-level restaurant and retail shops.

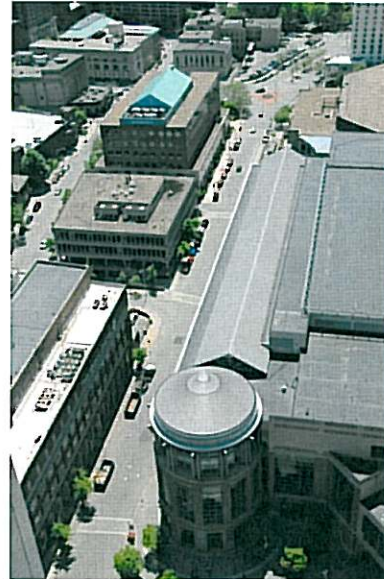
On the same day, Procaccianti opened 200 new hotel rooms in the 380-foot tower addition it is building to its landmark Westin Providence Hotel. The 103 luxury condominiums being built in the tower’s upper floors will be completed in early November, said Ralph V. Izzi Jr., Procaccianti’s spokesman.

“We expect to have our homeowners moved in by Thanksgiving,” he said.

The exterior construction of the 32-story tower was completed with a topping-off ceremony in March. In addition to the hotel rooms and condominiums, the building houses a Fleming’s Prime Steak House & Wine Bar and other retail shops at street level and several floors of private parking for its homeowners, Izzi said.

Within the next couple of months, Procaccianti expects to raze the Fogarty Building on Fountain Street and begin work to build a mixed-use office and parking complex with a street-level restaurant, he said.

Procaccianti purchased the Fogarty Building and the development rights to the former public safety complex from the Providence Redevelopment Agency in August 2005. The acquisitions were key components of the company’s plan to take part in an economic revitalization of the blocks surrounding the Dunk, which is in the midst of a \$65 million renovation that will link the facility to the adjacent convention center.



**PHOTO COURTESY THE PROCACCIANTI GROUP A VIEW from the Westin shows the R.I. Convention Center, right, and key Procaccianti properties: the Fogarty Building, center left, and in the background, La Salle Square.**

The upgraded, combined facilities are expected to increase the number of sports and entertainment events at the Dunk and attract larger conventions to the convention center, bringing thousands of new visitors to the area between La Salle Square and Kennedy Plaza.

"Obviously with the investment in the convention center and the Dunk, this is certainly becoming very much a vibrant part of the city, and our role as a developer is to contribute to the momentum," Izzi said. "This part of the city is just growing by leaps and bounds, and we feel that Providence has all the key indicators that show it's a great city for us to invest in."

In February, Procaccianti completed its upgrade of the Holiday Inn that had operated for many years near the Dunk into the Hilton Providence. The \$30 million hotel renovation also included the addition of a street-level atrium that now houses a Starbucks café and Shula's 347, an upscale steak house founded by the NFL football coaching legend Don Shula, which opened in the hotel in February.

Construction crews began tearing down the vacant public safety complex almost immediately after Providence's top building official said the building posed a safety hazard, clearing the way for demolition.

Then on Aug. 14, an employee of AA Wrecking & Asbestos Abatement Co. in Johnston was taken from the demolition site to the hospital with an ankle injury after the excavator he was operating tipped on its side. Izzi said Procaccianti had launched an investigation of the accident, which he said was believed to have occurred when a foundation wall in the basement collapsed under the weight of the excavator.

The demolition, which Izzi said will take about three weeks, already had been delayed by more than a year as the Providence Preservation Society, the West Broadway Neighborhood Association, the College Hill Neighborhood Association and other civic groups mounted a campaign to save the building, which they argued was structurally sound and historically significant.

The Downtown Neighborhood Alliance supported the demolition, saying it will spur economic development.

Some groups also opposed the city's decision to allow Procaccianti to turn the site into a surface parking lot until a new building plan is drafted and approved.

Jef Nickerson, president of Greater City: Providence, a group that advocates dense, mixed-use development downtown, said he believes the city should not have conveyed the property to Procaccianti before approving a plan for redevelopment that promised to increase pedestrian traffic and contribute to the downtown's community fabric.

"It gives an incentive to other developers to do the same thing," Nickerson said. "You buy a building and you tear it down and you build parking, because the city obviously allows that, and it's something that the city shouldn't be making so easy for developers."

Izzi declined to speculate on how long it might take Procaccianti to design a plan for the site and move it through regulatory approval, except to say that "as soon as we can move forward, we will."

"You can hopefully take comfort in the fact that The Procaccianti Group is committed to investing in downtown Providence, and our intention is to do what's in the best interests of the city," he said. •