

CURIOUS?

Here's a look inside the old winery

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

Livonia businessman John White is determined to overcome seven years of neglect, vandalism and a sceptical Farmington City Council to transform the vacant 96-year-old LaSalle winery into a restaurant and office building.

Armed with a building permit and the name of a likely tenant for the restaurant, White plans to make his second bid within a few weeks for preferential treatment in the issuing of the city's only unassigned liquor license.

City officials had told White to secure a building permit before his request would be considered. Three other prospective developers have lost interest in the building during the last seven years, administrators want proof of serious efforts at restoration.

"There is one party that is more interested in the building than the others," White said of the three groups that are interested in operating the restaurant. "But the deal hasn't been closed yet."

White's manufacturing representative's firm, Stirling and Whitery, is scheduled to move into the building within a month.

Meanwhile, he has removed 130 bushels of labels, four truckloads of rubbish and weeds and four vanloads of junk from the three-story building.

AFTER REPLACING HALF of the 2,600 square feet of window glass in the building at a cost of \$1.60 a square foot, White still finds himself plagued by vandals. Over the Labor Day weekend, someone cut hoses and stole tools which were stored in the building.

White expects to invest between \$60-70,000 in the building. The clean-up has cost him \$11,000.

"The building was closed for about seven years," he said. "Although there were others interested in it, no one else had tried to clean it up."

White is stymied by a patchwork of wine labels pasted to the floor of the building's offices. "We've tried to scrape them off. We poured water on them, hoping that

would make it easier to remove the labels," he said. "We want to scrape them off before we put a new floor over the old one."

The wood-paneled offices were damaged when the building's drains couldn't handle the runoff during a rainstorm.

"We had a lake on the roof," White said. "Most of the paneling is still good," he said. "We're going to keep as much of it as we can."

The winery's storeroom still houses records from 1969, the year the LaSalle left the building. An opened wood-paneled safe yielded old receipts. The safe remains open because its combination has been lost.

In the wine tasting room, a planter, which had been mounted on the ceiling, droops halfway to the floor.

The faucets have been taken from the room's yellowed sink.

Downstairs, where diners may someday enjoy their meals inside the glass-lined vats, workers step over puddles of wine.

The interiors of the 86 vats are now nearly inaccessible. The only openings on the first floor are three feet high and three feet wide. White hopes to preserve the openings and the winery's wooden machinery as historical curiosities.

THE VATS AVERAGE 10 to six feet in diameter. Most of them extend to the second floor.

The hydraulic elevator will also be restored, White said. "Edison has asked us not to run it because they feel it might not be safe. But we had it running before they came out, and it runs perfectly," White said.

The steel machinery will be sold. Two wineries and a vinegar manufacturer have expressed interest in it.

In one room bottling machinery is still hooked up to electricity. An undetermined quantity of wine is still in the machine's tank.

"I haven't turned it on," White said. "I'm afraid I'll get wine sprayed all over the room. This place is dirty enough."