

Fortner Upholstering moves to South Side, bringing jobs and space for creative tenants

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Fortner Upholstering, an 88-year-old Columbus maker of upholstered furniture, has moved into a historic building on the South Side that started out as the home of a very different manufacturer — of horse-drawn fire carriages.

The former Seagraves Fire Truck Manufacturing plant at 2000-2060 S. High St. — actually several buildings that were added onto and connected starting in the late 1800s — gives Fortner room to consolidate and expand its manufacturing operations. Room not needed will be available to lease to other creative businesses.

“We’re still figuring out exactly what our approach is going to be” to leasing the more than half of the 200,000-square-foot facility, said Justin McAllister, president of Fortner.

McAllister, a grandson of company founder David Fortner Sr., already has leased space to a metalworking operation and to Actors’ Theatre of Columbus, which plans to use the space to build and store sets for its productions.

McAllister also said he is close to signing a deal with Alternative Fashion Mob, a Columbus fashion collective.

Fortner sold its former two buildings on Johnstown Road near John Glenn Columbus International Airport and leased the South Side property earlier this year. After environmental issues were resolved, the company bought the property — most recently owned by cardboard-box maker Jet Container Co. — at the end of June for about \$1.1 million. NAI Ohio Equities brokered the deals.

Fortner has a small showroom at the new location and also maintains a retail store, Fortner Fine Living, that opened last year on Edgehill Road next to the Grandview Yard development.

In recent years, McAllister has built up the commercial side of its business, working for clients including Ohio State University and Nationwide. Work has ranged from reupholstering hundreds of chairs to building upholstered bench seating for cafeteria use.

Fortner's business is now two-thirds commercial, one-third residential.

McAllister said the purchase of the South Side property was based largely on affordability and freeway access. But he added that he "loves old buildings," so he is enjoying renovating the historic space with the aid of Triad Architects.

The new location has significance. McAllister's grandfather founded the business on the South Side, and Fortner's return to the neighborhood coincides with the demolition of the nearby Columbus Castings plant. That manufacturing facility employed more than 800 before it was closed last year.

Although Fortner's 42 jobs don't make up for that loss, McAllister hopes his company and others that lease space there will steadily bring more jobs to the area.

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