

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

## Union Trust Building finds new hope with techie tenants

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Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette

The circular rotunda of the Union Trust Building in Downtown Pittsburgh.

By Mark Belko / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Once bankrupt, the historic Union Trust Building, Downtown is rebounding under new ownership, with two new tech-based tenants in the fold and efforts afoot to upgrade the office space to meet modern standards while preserving the ornate architecture.

Truefit, a commercial app and software company, began relocating its headquarters from Cranberry into the Grant Street building Monday. Jawbone, the San Francisco-based wearable technology company, moved in last month.

They are the first new tenants to be signed to leases since The Davis Companies, a Boston real estate investment and development firm, bought the property for \$14 million at a sheriff's sale in March.

Together, the two companies will occupy about 30,000 square feet in the 11-story building built by industrialist Henry Clay Frick and opened in 1917.

With about 250,000 square feet still to lease, the new tenants make but a small dent in terms of the space available. But both represent a much needed boost after the real estate ended up in bankruptcy under previous owner 501 Grant Street Partners with a vacancy rate that topped 60 percent.

“We’re very gratified, particularly since they are young, growing tech companies, one of the key targets for tenants in the project we envision here,” said Jonathan Davis, CEO and founder of The Davis Companies.

Truefit and Jawbone are occupying temporary space on the 10th and 11th floors of the building. In the latter half of 2015, they will be moving into renovated two-story suites on those floors. Both will occupy “unique, sky lit, two-story open plan spaces.”

They and other tenants will have access to an opulent 348-seat auditorium on the 10th floor originally built for Mr. Frick and his family.

Jawbone and Truefit will join two existing tenants that now occupy nearly half of the 500,000-square-foot property.

One is AMEC Foster Wheeler, an international engineering and project management firm whose global environmental sciences headquarters is in the building, and the other is Novitas Solutions, a processing company for government-sponsored health-care programs.

The Davis Companies managed to secure the new tenants even before it embarks next year on a project exceeding \$35 million to rehabilitate the vacant floors of the 97-year-old building to bring them up to 21st century Class A office standards.

As part of its plans, it will reduce the size of some building columns, increase ceiling heights, and remove some interior partitions to create more open floor space.

It also plans to remove marble panels on some floors that were not part of the original construction and replace them with glass to provide more light and openness.

Davis also will add an underground 150- to 175-space parking garage with bicycle storage and showers, a 5,200-square-foot fitness center, and improved conference and lecture facilities.

On the ninth floor, it will create inexpensive incubator space for companies just starting out. Mr. Davis said he has been talking to the city about attracting growing tech companies into the building in an effort to create an “innovation district” Downtown.

Darrin Grove, Truefit CEO and founder, said that initiative was part of what attracted the company to its new location.

“For years, we have been exploring a vision for a central Downtown location where innovative companies would collaborate on breakthrough new products. That dream is finally becoming a reality at the Union Trust Building,” he said.

Mr. Davis, who grew up in Squirrel Hill, said a “number of other discussions” are underway with other possible tenants.

“There’s a pent-up interest in the building,” said Jason Stewart, the Jones Lang LaSalle executive vice president who is marketing the office space.

The company also has big plans for the 40,000 square feet of vacant retail space. New storefronts with a historic flavor are being designed. It is seeking to attract restaurants and an upscale convenience market to fill the space. A freestanding coffee shop may be added in the rotunda.

The company also will be restoring the building’s mansard roof, using original molds, and other architectural details.

Mr. Davis said the Union Trust project will be a “certified historic rehabilitation” that will meet required federal and state standards. He said the company is looking at possible federal or state financial help in completing the rehabilitation.

“This is a really exciting project. We think we have the opportunity to do something of very high quality that’s unlike any other building in Downtown Pittsburgh and at the same time make a difference in Downtown Pittsburgh,” he said.

A Flemish Gothic structure designed by famed architect Frederick J. Osterling, the Union Trust Building opened as a four-story shopping arcade with 240 shops on lower levels and 700 offices above. Its defining feature is the central rotunda with its stained glass dome.