

TLC, a Cafe and Community Kitchen, Being Developed in Albany's South End

Business will serve the public and offer rental space for food entrepreneurs in Pommer building on South Pearl Street

By Steve Barnes
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ALBANY — A kitchen, and maybe two, are taking shape at the rear of the first floor of a four-story South Pearl Street building that in its 180 years of life has been a Baptist church, synagogue, grocery store, furniture store, hardware store and vertical mall with a warren of small and micro businesses.

The kitchen(s) are for TLC, short for Tea Lemonade Coffee, a cafe and community kitchen owned by Kaciem Swain, an entrepreneur and advocate for community development whose past projects in the South End have included the South End Night Market, Capital Curbside delivery service and AVillage, a grass-roots neighborhood group. Swain also runs Velvet Rope Group, an events and hospitality company that curates everything from speed dating and business-development panels to poetry and music nights.

As Swain envisions TLC, it will be the food component of the business incubator and community and cultural center that is the Capital Region Community Investment Trust, the formal name and identity for the 23,000-square-foot building at 153 S. Pearl St. Engraved in stone above the front door is the word Pommer, the name of the furniture store that opened there in the beginning of the 20th century. The Community Investment Trust hopes the building comes to be known as the Pommer again, though many still call it the Coliseum, the name when it was a mall prior to being purchased in 2022 by the Community Loan Fund, according to CIT's operations director, Ruth Kassel. A nonprofit formally designated as a community development financial institution, which loans to those who may not qualify for traditional financing, the loan fund is transforming CIT into a wealth-building property in which people may buy ownership shares for between \$10 and \$100 per month, Kassel said. So far, more than \$5 million has been spent on renovations, she said.

Capital Region BOCES occupies the fourth floor, offering GED and English-language classes. The third floor has been leased, for an Aug. 1 move-in, by an entrepreneur who envisions it for mental-health and wellness services and coworking, and the second floor is occupied mostly by hair and beauty businesses, some with up to 20 years of tenancy. Of the building's 18 leasable spaces, seven remain available.

At ground level, cafe seating and lounge areas will be at the front, with a windowed space facing South Pearl Street envisioned as a multimedia studio, perhaps for podcasts, video recording or other creative endeavors. Given the high visibility, it will also draw community interest, according to Swain.

"People will definitely see it as they go past," he said.

He hopes to open the cafe by Sept. 1 at the latest, earlier in August if possible. He'll offer all-day food and is looking for an operator who wants to rent the kitchen for a lunch business. A parallel use of the kitchen will be as an inspected commercial cooking space, called a commissary kitchen, available on a rental basis, either for single uses or on an ongoing basis for those needing space and equipment for food production. Rates will be \$25 to \$35 per hour depending on usage and needs and with a four-hour minimum, Swain said, with a discount for operators who sell during events he promotes and share a percentage of their sales revenue with him. He said he will also offer a small selection of groceries, grab-and-go fare and frozen food for the public and wholesale ingredients for kitchen renters.

The kitchen's major appliances have arrived. On the day last week that Swain posted a photo of it — shiny stainless counters, fryer, grill, range, fridge, freezer — and announced his plans, he showed the space to seven potential renters, and interest has continued; over two days earlier this week, Swain did walk-throughs with another dozen people in need of a production kitchen for their various food ventures. As of Wednesday, the total was more than 40 visitors, he said. The primary commissary kitchens currently available around Albany are Capital Cooks in Colonie and Capital Roots in Troy, both about 10 miles from the Pommer building.

Across the hall from the equipped kitchen, in a room tiled in black and white but otherwise empty except for construction equipment, Swain and Kassel hope to build a kitchen for baking and other production cooking that doesn't need an exhaust hood or other ventilation to the outside.

Swain said, "We know there's demand. I want to incubate people who want to get to a packaged-goods level — getting them from here to Price Chopper, Whole Foods, Honest Weight. We want to be a pipeline for that."