

# Rebuilding Albion one project at a time

## Bill Dobbins purchases and restores Peabody Building

By **JOHN HENDLER**  
Editor-in-Chief  
and  
**APRIL KRAGT**  
Staff Writer

In addition to 25 years of practicing medicine and 31 years at Caster Concepts, Inc., Bill Dobbins, president and CEO of Caster Concepts since 2003, has been striving to rebuild the Albion community.

One way Dobbins has managed to do this is by purchasing and restoring the Peabody Building, located at 400 S. Superior St. in Albion, and creating several new businesses that are or will be located inside.

These businesses include Pure Albion, a retail store that showcases local artists' products that have some sort of connection to Albion or Albion College; The Office, a drop-in co-work space that people can rent to conduct business in; Brick Street Marketing, which is the new location for the Caster Concepts marketing team; Foundry Bakehouse and Deli; and the Peabody Lofts, which are upper apartments.

All businesses are open except Foundry Bakehouse and Deli, which will open sometime in the fall, and the apartments, which have a tentative opening date of Sept. 1.

"In sort of rebuilding Albion, I figured I could continue to build on space that...would service Caster Concepts well, or I could invest a similar amount of capital in a space downtown, provide a cool place for my marketing team to work and provide a service to the wider sector of the community," said Dobbins.

Dobbins first began serving the community in 1978 by practicing medicine in both Albion and Marshall with his brothers. Then, in 1987, he co-founded Caster Concepts — a company that makes specialty and custom-designed casters for industrial use — and he continued to participate in its leadership as he worked as a doctor. In 2003, however, he decided to leave the medical practice to pursue his Master of Business Administration at the University of Michigan, and that same year he was appointed president and CEO of Caster Concepts.

"It's been a great opportunity," Dobbins said of leaving the practice for his new position at Caster Concepts. "I've never looked back and thought, 'I wish I'd never made this decision.' I worked hard, spent a lot of time at it...That's allowed us to do other things in the community, so the success at Caster Concepts has allowed us to invest back into the community."

Dobbins hopes to help the community continue to develop and reach its full potential — especially its economic potential, and especially through utilizing the city's vacant buildings.

At one point, Albion was an economically prospering community, said Dobbins. In the late 60s or early 70s, Albion held a population of approximately 15,000 people, many of whom worked at the various industrial companies in town. Gradually, however, Albion lost these companies, and the population declined to about 7,000.

"Tremendous wealth has left the community," Dobbins said. "Tremendous amounts of people left the community. So, we still have the infrastructure of a town that's supporting 15,000 people but only has 7,000 people in it."

By the late 90s or early 2000s, said Dobbins, Albion hit its economic rock bottom and remained there for a while. But with the downtown arrival of Kids 'N' Stuff Museum about 12 years ago, Albion has steadily been on the up and up.

In fact, after restoration of the downtown Bohm Theatre commenced in 2011, Albion College took notice of how the community greatly supported the arrival and sustainability of downtown businesses. Because the economic downfall had a negative impact on Albion College, key members at the college decided to get involved in rebuilding Albion through helping to revitalize its downtown.

"Albion College sort of climbed out of its hole saying, 'You know, we're in sort of a tough business now. We've neglected our community,'" said Dobbins. "When people come to visit Albion College, they take taxis and they drive downtown and they go, 'This doesn't look very good.' And then they go to Hope College in Holland, and they go to Adrian, and then they go to Alma and they think, 'These towns are a lot better than what Albion is. I like Albion as far as a college, but I can't send [my son or daughter] to Albion with the way that community looks.'"

In order to keep this scenario from continuing, four people from the college joined together to figure out how they could support the redevelopment of Albion. They recruited others to help them with this process, including Mauri Ditzler, the college's president who had experience rebuilding communities, and a surgeon from Saginaw named Samuel Shaheen who had run a development company for years.

Bringing their diverse expertise to the table, they tried to



The Peabody Lofts will open around Sept. 1 and will consist of two bedroom, two full bathroom apartments with plenty of amenities. (Photo by John Hendler)

figure out what they should do. They finally decided to purchase and restore the Ludington Building downtown, making it available to Albion College students and faculty.

Consequently, this inspired others to buy abandoned real estate properties in Albion and turn them into something that would attract prospective Albion College students, residents and tourists, starting with the Courtyard Marriott hotel.

Dobbins admits that he was initially skeptical when he heard of the plans for the hotel.

"I thought, 'No way. How could [the owner] ever support a hotel in downtown Albion?'" said Dobbins. "As a lifelong resident, I think you get so encumbered by what you see every day...That's your mindset."

Yet, Dobbins realized he was wrong.

"The truth of the matter is, four years later we have a downtown Courtyard Marriott that is amazing," he said. "It's the only full-brick façade Courtyard Marriott anywhere with nice amenities and everything. So, with collaboration with the college, the community, private investment and a heck of a lot of hard work that came to fruition, it really happened."

After seeing that investing in the



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rebuilding of Albion wasn't a futile effort, more people started doing so. And, in 2015, Dobbins and a few others formed the Albion Reinvestment Corporation, a non-profit whose goal is to "receive and administer funds and property to combat community deterioration in the downtown business district of the city of Albion and surrounding areas."

"We believe [the Albion Reinvestment Corporation] now will become the driving force for the redevelopment of Albion," said Dobbins.

One of the nonprofit's projects is the Big Albion Plan, which consists of the renovation of approximately

25 storefronts and 50 upper apartments.

Dobbins realizes that though rebuilding Albion will take a lot of time and hard work, it's not something to give up on.

"It's not a slam dunk," he said. "There's nothing that is that easy...But we're in it for the long run....The last thing downtowns need is turnover. They need stabilization, they need businesses that will be there and the ability to work with them, coach them, guide them and help to market them. All those things are what it takes to build a community."