Demolition paves way for Dorothy Day expansion

By Maja Beckstrom
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Construction workers demolish the Labor Building at 411 Main St. in St. Paul on Monday, August 17, 2015. It will be replaced by a five-story Dorothy Day Center, the first phase of a two-building campus that will shelter homeless people and move them into housing. (Pioneer Press: Holly Peterson)

The first step in building a house for the homeless is knocking down what's in the way. On Monday, a demolition team took down the old Labor & Professional Centre at 411 Main St. in downtown St. Paul in preparation for an ambitious replacement for the Dorothy Day Center now operating on the neighboring block.

"It is so exciting after you do all that planning and architectural work and fundraising to see the actual real work starting," said a giddy Tim Marx, executive director of Catholic Charities, which has operated a homeless shelter in downtown St. Paul since the early 1980s. "It provides a real sense of momentum."

The existing Dorothy Day Center, named after a 20th-century New York Catholic social activist, shelters some 250 people each night on mats laid on the floors in a couple of large, noisy rooms. Men and women are separated by a row of folding chairs, and mats have to be carried away for meals. Catholic Charities and city leaders have long talked about the need for more dignified housing.

The new five-story building, tentatively called Higher Ground St. Paul, will be built on the site of the old union hall with emergency shelter bunks for about 278 people, plus a courtyard, a separate dining room and nearly 200 single-room apartments on the top three floors.

St. Louis Park-based Watson-Forsberg Construction plans to use precast concrete walls, so the L-shaped building will go up quickly.

When it opens in December 2016, the current Dorothy Day Center across the street will come down, and in its place, Catholic Charities will build a "connection center" to house county workers, a clinic, veterans services, employment training, GED classes, laundry and a host of other services to help people stabilize their lives. It will be topped by an additional 166 apartments.

The two-building campus will cost $100 million, with $40 million coming from private fundraising and the rest from the city, county and state.