

Alex Johnson to expand

By Dan Daly

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Hotel Alex Johnson's first floor will expand by 2,000 square feet in coming weeks — no small trick for a building that is hemmed in on all sides.

In January, Tom Didier, the historic hotel's owner, bought the building next door to the St. Joseph Street hotel. The building, 608 St. Joseph St., formerly housed the Top Drawer clothing store. Courthouse records

indicate the property was sold by Steve and Peggy Busse for \$92,000.

"It's the only way we've got to go," Didier said. "We're surrounded by an alley, streets, buildings."

Within a couple of weeks, crews will knock out part of the wall between the hotel lobby and the adjoining building, creating an archway next to the hotel lobby's fireplace.

"The archway will look like it's been there since 1928," Didier said.

The rear half of the Top Drawer building will become an expanded Alex Johnson gift shop, Didier said.

With the extra space, the hotel will be able to expand its wares to include more Indian art, Western art and Indian craft work.

"We've incubated that business out of our lobby gift shop. We've watched it grow and become more popular," Didier said. He said the arts and crafts were especially popular with motor coach tourists who have become a big part of the hotel's business.

The new gift shop will be open for business by early May, when the motor coach season begins, Didier said.

The front half of the store likely will be rented out to a retailer, he said. Negotiations are under way. Although the front and rear halves will be separated by a partition, customers will be able to walk between the gift shop and the other store.

The second floor of the Top Drawer building will remain vacant 11 years after it and the upper level of the adjoining building on the west side were damaged by a fire. Didier said he had no immediate plans for the second floor.