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Maryland

A firehouse makeover

Highlandtown station to reopen after a yearlong renovation

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On a freshly painted wall of the Highlandtown fire station hangs a montage of photos of what once was: a ruinous building with grimy bathrooms, a slumping ceiling and a leaky roof.

Not even the fire pole worked.

"The station was structurally unsafe," said Battalion Commander Raymond Devilbiss Jr. "It just got to the point where we couldn't stay there anymore."

But after a year of repairs, bankrolled by two local companies, Engine Company 41's fire station is once again inhabitable - cushy even. The firefighters, who were displaced for more than a year at a neighboring station while theirs underwent renovation, will return to the South Conkling Street station today after a reopening ceremony.

The new, polished station boasts two lounges - one with a big-screen TV that the firefighters pooled money for - a new kitchen with stainless steel appliances and a dishwasher, new gym equipment, two bunk rooms and a reading room.

And all that is in addition to the new roof and the new electrical, plumbing, heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems.

"It was just like the show Extreme Makeover," said firefighter Al Yingling, who, along with the rest of his engine company, is eager to return.

The station's rebirth is owed to the public-private program Adopt A Firehouse, the goal of which is to rehabilitate the city's declining firehouses.

Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, which specializes in restoring older, historically significant

properties, and Obrecht Commercial Real Estate committed more than \$500,000 to overhauling the 113-year-old building.

"Struever Bros. and Obrecht really stepped up to the plate," said Chief Kevin Cartwright, a Fire Department spokesman who spent three years at the Highlandtown station before shifting to headquarters.

Kate Oeming, director of community partnership for Struever Bros., called the firehouse project "a great experience."

"As a company we're always interested in doing pro bono projects that build the vitality of the neighborhoods where we are developing," Oeming said.

Fire officials are counting on the success of the program's initial run to trigger contributions from other city businesses to help restore other firehouses.

"It is our hope that other local businesses will become interested in the program," said Devilbiss, who acted as a liaison to Struever Bros. and Obrecht during the renovations. "It's a lot to ask, but we're hoping this will be a model for others in the private sector."

The Highlandtown station was built in 1893 by the Baltimore County Fire Department. Formerly the home of Company No. 8, the station was transferred to the command of 41 when Highlandtown was annexed in 1919.

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