

BUSINESS

A look at what's happening inside the iconic Renaissance Center as GM moves HQ



Candice Williams

The Detroit News

Jan. 4, 2026, 11:00 p.m. ET

Detroit — One recent afternoon, patrons ate lunch at Joe Muer Seafood and looked at the Detroit River — a view that soon will become a memory.

That's because the Renaissance Center tower housing both Joe Muer and Andiamo Detroit Riverfront — Tower 400 — is among the two towers slated for demolition as part of the riverfront complex's planned redevelopment, a project likely to redefine a riverfront shaped for decades by the looming RenCen.

"I'll tell you how I personally felt — very sad about it," said Joe Vicari, founder of the Joe Vicari Restaurant Group, on news of sweeping changes coming for the soon-to-be former General Motors Co. headquarters. "We came in with Andiamo in 2004 when people were leaving the city, and we never looked back."

The Joe Muer and Andiamo restaurants are among the businesses that have to leave the Renaissance Center, if they haven't already, as its owner decamps for new digs and begins clearing tenants ahead of redevelopment plans that aim to reimagine the aging office and hotel complex.

GM is completing its move into Bedrock founder Dan Gilbert's new Hudson's Detroit complex on Woodward Avenue. Next, the automaker and Bedrock plan an estimated \$1.6 billion redevelopment of the Renaissance Center that would reduce

the five-tower complex's footprint by demolishing two towers and opening its frontage to a new public space.

"I wish they would have been able to figure out a different way for (what) they wanted to do, but that wasn't the case," Vicari said. "So we've got to pivot, and that's what we're doing."

A ghost town

Transition at the Renaissance Center has been noticeable for months. The food court is empty. Burger King's last day of business was in November; Panera Bread closed in October. Also in October, Urban Science, a global automotive consultancy and technology firm, said it will relocate its global headquarters from the Renaissance 400 Tower to Bedrock's One Campus Martius building.

CBRE, which manages the complex, declined to comment regarding occupancy.

In an email response, GM spokesperson Tara Stewart Kuhnen wrote, "We're focused on the next steps in redevelopment and look forward to continued progress. We will continue to work with the remaining tenants on their specific needs but have no additional details to share."

Andiamo Detroit Riverfront restaurant will remain open at the Renaissance Center until November or December, according to the Joe Vicari Restaurant Group. After that, the group plans to open a different style eatery on the riverfront, an Andiamo Italian Chophouse, at the new JW Marriott Detroit Water Square in 2027. That's about a mile away.

Joe Muer Seafood is expected to remain open until June 2027 after the NCAA tournament. Its new location has not yet been announced. However, John Vicari, vice president of Joe Muer, said plans are to remain in downtown Detroit.

Foot traffic at the Renaissance Center has been slow for years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the office market in downtown Detroit. "Pre-COVID,

we were busy with people coming, staying in the building or working in the building,” Joe Vicari said.

As remote and hybrid work became the norm, weekday lunch traffic declined. Now, GM employees are making a complete departure from the complex with the move into Bedrock's Hudson's Detroit and the automaker's Warren Tech Center.

Follow the customer

Realities of the current office market are driving the shift, said Paul Choukourian, executive managing director of Colliers in Metro Detroit. While the Renaissance Center offers great riverfront views, he said the massive complex is confusing to navigate, outdated and no longer competitive by modern office standards.

“I think the views are fabulous, and there’s a lot of pluses,” Choukourian said. “But over time, it was facing challenges. Given the current conditions of the office market and the lack of people looking to go to the RenCen, this is the logical move to redevelop it.”

Attracting workers requires active, vibrant buildings with amenities. As leases expire, Choukourian said he expects tenants to be encouraged to relocate, often with financial incentives and opportunities to upgrade at a new location.

Among those businesses is Allegra Marketing Print Mail, which has been in the Renaissance Center for nearly 20 years. GM terminated the company’s lease in Tower 400 and provided a relocation package, said owner Kurt Eschenburg.

The company plans to relocate in February to 111 Monroe Street near Campus Martius. Eschenburg said the decision brings mixed emotions as the company prepares to leave its longtime location while following its customers to where business activity has shifted.

“We were heartbroken,” he said. “We just don't see the reason why, but we've accepted the fact that we have to move, and we'll do the best. We'll make the most

out of it and just leave.”

Eschenburg remembers when the Renaissance Center was considered a city within a city: "If there's a convention in the winter, they could stay here and not go anywhere and have good food and entertainment, everything for their entire stay."

While they're sad to leave, he said there's a bit of excitement about the future with the upcoming move, which includes being closer to GM, one of its clients.

"We're following our customers," he said. "We followed them into here. We're going to follow them. We're going to keep our presence in downtown Detroit and make sure that we have a close proximity to our customers."

Deal detailed

Under plans announced in late 2024, Bedrock and General Motors plan to demolish the Renaissance Center's riverfront-facing Towers 300 and 400, along with the podium of retail and showroom space. They propose to remove about 1.25 million square feet from the 5.5 million-square-foot complex and open about 6 acres of riverfront to public use.

Tower 100 would be converted to residential use, Tower 200 would remain office space and the central 73-story tower would reduce its hotel rooms to 850 from 1,200 by converting the top floors into luxury apartments.

Gilbert has committed \$1 billion to the project, with GM pledging \$250 million. Bedrock is seeking at least \$250 million in public support, including \$75 million already approved by the Downtown Development Authority, as well as additional funding through Michigan's transformational brownfield program. Recently introduced legislation in the Senate could raise the program's statewide cap.

Alex Calderone, president of the Calderone Advisory Group, said the project's success hinges on broader economic and political factors beyond the developers' control, particularly policy support from Lansing and the city administration.

While the developers can control construction quality, budget, aesthetics and physical accessibility, he said the overall outcome depends on these macro issues.

"To a large degree, the economy can't crap out on us either," he said. "There are a lot of things that have to go right for that to work. Do I think it's a good idea? Yeah. I think it would be great for the city. But without looking at their economics, understanding what their assumptions are, it's tough for me to opine on whether I think it's a viable project. The big thing is to make sure that they have the budget to do it the right way."

As for the displaced tenants, Calderone said that the commercial real estate market can absorb them in other locations: "I would surmise that there's more likely than not enough vacancy to ensure that there are plenty of new homes for those tenants that will have to be forced to migrate."

At Joe Muer Seafood, John Vicari was overseeing operations. Sitting in the restaurant's dining room, he described a careful balance between preparing for a move and maintaining high-quality service for patrons.

"There's nothing better than this," he said of the view, one of the restaurant's draws. He noted that the holiday season had plenty of reservations on the books. His biggest message for patrons is that the restaurant is still open.

"We've got plenty of time," he said. "And it's going to be a smooth transition."

One recent afternoon at Joe Muer, Ron Taylor, CEO of Detroit Area Agency on Aging, had a business lunch with Alice Thompson, board chair of the DAAA. Their booth overlooked the scenic Detroit River and the Windsor skyline.

Thompson, a longtime Detroit resident, said she frequents Joe Muer Seafood and that she'll miss its location overlooking the water.

"It is so conducive for having a nice, engaged business meeting," she said. "The ambiance are great, the food is great, the service is excellent. And somehow being

by the water and conducting business is really ... I don't have the right word to describe it, but it really helps you think broadly about how to improve outcomes.”

Taylor said the restaurant has long been an ideal place for lunches and family celebrations. He views the Renaissance Center and its towers as “a place that illuminates the landscape or the skyline for the city.”

The complex is noticeably emptier, Taylor said, with less foot traffic and fewer people. He did express some enthusiasm about future development along the riverfront.

“I'm hopeful that whatever comes next, as far as whatever replaces those two towers, that they would further development and be very complementary of the development efforts that are taking place on the Riverwalk," he said.

cwilliams@detroitnews.com

Featured Weekly Ad



