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NEW BRUNSWICK — The city's hub is moving.

With construction of the Heldrich Hotel residential and retail complex scheduled for a late-winter completion date, and with New Brunswick's government and cultural locales already nearby, the city's figurative center could shift east from the Albany Street corridor.

The makeover of another portion of the Livingston Avenue and George Street axis — Monument Square — began this week when several London plane trees there were sawed off at the base.

"This has really become much more prominent and regained its stature as a major focal point in the downtown area," city spokesman Bill Bray said of the area around Livingston Avenue and George Street. "This point of the city is again becoming the center."

The square's centerpiece, a Union soldier holding a flag atop a 15-foot column built in 1893, won't be moved. A plaque commemorating Staff Sgt. Frank Z. Molnar, who was killed in action in Vietnam in 1967, will be moved to the back of the square, near the flagpoles. So will a large rock, which marks the site of a former Rutgers building.

A rose granite monument, dedicated by the Military Order of the Purple Heart, will be added and a stone waterfall will replace the fountain and encircle the Civil War column. Flower beds, shrubs and grass also will be part of the square, which will otherwise be laid in parts with cypress pavers.

Six new trees, saplings about 18 feet high, also will be planted.

"This creates a nice slice of green space," Bray said. "An oasis in an urban space."

According to a "very ambitious" timetable, the \$600,000 project could be done by fall, he said.

As part of the square's renovation, the bus stop east of the corner will move down a block, to the front of Rockoff Hall.

The monument area was last renovated, mostly with brick and concrete, in 1981, when George Street's road surface, sidewalks and traffic lights were all upgraded.

Francis Schott, who along with his two partners has owned the Stage Left restaurant across from the square for 14 years, said the area's transformation bodes well for all of downtown.

"I see it already. I don't think it's necessarily going to bring the focal point here but it's going to stretch the focal point," Schott said. The threesome also own Catherine Lombardi's restaurant on the corner.

While daytime foot traffic was mostly confined to the Albany Street side of the downtown when the restaurant opened, Schott said he expects commerce to keep improving closer to New Street.



"I think that's going to change things," Schott said of the square's renovation. "Everything in between (Route 27 and New Street) is going to benefit."

And, come fall, Catherine Lombardi's will open for lunch. "That's largely because of what's going on this side of town," Schott said.

Longer-term, the George Street corridor's roads and sidewalks are also slated for reconstruction, Bray said.

The road's reconstruction "will smooth things out, literally and figuratively," Bray said.