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Redevelopment authority takes step toward demolition of Brownsville business

By Amy Karpinsky, Herald-Standard
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The Fayette County Redevelopment Authority Tuesday approved a contract for engineering services that is the first step toward demolition of the Autenreith Building in downtown Brownsville.

In a deal reached last month inside the chambers of Fayette County Judge John F. Wagner Jr., the authority will own and demolish the structure, also known as the Plaza Theater, and then offer to sell it to Brownsville Group Ltd. or its designee.

Redevelopment authority solicitor Herbert Margolis explained that as a part of the settlement, the authority will work with the borough engineer to develop specifications for demolishing the structure after which time all the associated costs will be calculated as a final purchase price for the building. Margolis said either Ernest E. or Marilyn Liggett (owners of Brownsville Group Ltd.) or their successors will have one year from the demolition to purchase the property back for the amount the authority has invested in it.

Margolis said as a part of the agreement, a committee consisting of representatives from the authority, the borough engineer and the Liggett group will get together to establish the demolition specifications.

Prior to the recent demolition agreement, ownership of the building was in dispute, with the Liggetts trying to retain title to the building after the redevelopment authority declared them in default of a previous agreement in which the site would be renovated into a restaurant and marina. The redevelopment

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authority granted the Liggetts seven one-year extensions to the original agreement before declaring them in default and claiming ownership of the property, which it then planned to give to the Brownsville Area Revitalization Corp.

Executive director Raymond C. Polaski said Ed Myers of Fayette Engineering is the engineer who will handle the specifications. The building is located in a historic district, is attached to the historic Cast Iron Bridge and is over Dunlap Creek. Polaski said various agencies, including the Pennsylvania Historic Museum Commission, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Department of Labor and Industry, the state Department of Transportation and the Army Corps of Engineers must be involved in the process.

Margolis said once all authority pays for all the demolition costs, the building is not going to be a "cheap purchase." Margolis said Liggett had eight or nine years to improve the building and nothing was done, so it is important that the conditions are that the property must be purchased in a year.

Speculating that if a Native American corporation that purchased Liggetts properties in the borough bring in bingo-style slot machines and generate a lot of money, Margolis said the property will likely be purchased.

Liggett earlier announced plans to put in a marina at the site of the Autenreith building.

Margolis said if there are any complications with the agreement, they can go back to Wagner. However, he said he didn't foresee a problem, since Liggett insisted that the borough's engineer is a part of the process.

A motion was approved to enter into a contract with Fayette Engineering for engineering services for a demolition project at the Autenreith Building not to exceed \$9,335. "This is very preliminary. We still have to approve the (demolition) specifications, put it out to bid and grant the low bid," Margolis said.

In other action, the redevelopment authority voted to approve the 2004 administration budget in the amount of \$1,102,022. Polaski said the balanced budget is 3.5 percent higher than the 2003 budget of 1,064,921. He said they kept expenses to a minimum, and pay ranges were increased 3 percent to reflect a cost of living increase.

"If it increased 3 percent for salaries, it increased a half percent," Polaski said. The budget is broken down into categories of administration, construction, rehabilitation and weatherization, as well as further sub-categories.

In personnel action, the redevelopment authority voted to hire two full time employees- a rehabilitation clerk and a weatherization installer 1.

Paula Gregor was hired to fill the rehabilitation clerk position made available when Doris Sokol left after 31 years of service. Polaski said 60 applications were received for the position, and eight people were interviewed. He said Gregor has experience with mortgages and deed transfers and worked for Smithfield Bank and National City Bank for 27 years. Redevelopment Authority member Charles Cieszynski said he became acquainted with Gregor 30 years ago through Smithfield Bank. "I feel she will be an asset here for the Redevelopment Authority," Cieszynski said prior to voting to hire Gregor.

David Fuller was hired as a full time weatherization installer 1. He had been working as a part time installer for about nine months. Polaski said there is now sufficient income and workload to have four full time installer positions. He said Fuller has already obtained some of the training needed for the job.

The redevelopment authority approved the sale of surplus land at 12-14 Wilson Avenue to Mark Smith and Mark Lowe in the amount of \$1,500. The men plan to use the property for green space. Polaski said the authority acquired the property via a donation when the authority needed donated land for a federal home bank application. Although the authority had

previously sought a price of \$2,426 for the 40-by-115-foot lot, Polaski said he feels that \$1,500 is a fair price since it is not a "buildable lot."

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