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City council approves second measure to use KOZs

By Steve Ferris, Herald-Standard
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Uniontown City Council approved a second measure in as many weeks to use tax-free Keystone Opportunity Zones to spur development in the city.

On Monday, council took the first step toward including an abandoned building at 11 W. Main St., Marshall Park and a vacant lot adjacent to the Uniontown Public Library into a Keystone Opportunity Zone Enhancement Area.

Council unanimously approved a resolution requesting the Southwest Pennsylvania Planning Commission to reallocate KOZ acreage from the Fayette County Business Park on Route 40 to the building, park and the lot.

The Fayette County Redevelopment Authority and South Union Township supervisors have requested that 110 KOZ acres in the park be decertified and made available to proposed KOZ projects in other areas.

Last week, council approved a similar resolution for the Fayette Building. The Fayette County Commissioners and the Uniontown Area School also approved the KOZ request for the Fayette Building.

City Councilman Gary Crozier said he planned to attend Monday night's school board and ask the panel to grant KOZ status for the three properties, and that he will ask the commissioners to schedule a special meeting this month to hear the request.

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Applications for the KOZ program are due to the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development by June 1.

Final approval from the DCED is needed, but the city, school district and county also must approve KOZ requests because real estate, income and other local taxes would be abated from Jan. 1, 2004, through Dec. 31, 2013, under the program. Most state taxes are also exempted.

Council's initial resolution listed eight properties it was considering to place in KOZs, but five vacant buildings were removed because their owners are paying the due taxes.

The 11 W. Main St. building, which was identified on the resolution as the Cornish building, has a delinquent tax bill and is scheduled to be sold at a county tax sale in March, solicitor Dan Webster said.

Between \$40,000 and \$45,000 is owed on the mortgage, Webster said.

Webster said the building will be sold "free and clear" of the mortgage lien and delinquent taxes at the tax sale.

The park and the lot are already tax-exempt.

City Councilman Bob Cerjanec said the city would not lose anything even if the KOZ application would be denied because it is not receiving taxes from the three properties now.

"Nothing from nothing leaves nothing," Cerjanec said.

The vacant buildings that were removed from the initial resolution are the former Town Mall on West Main Street, the Murphy's building on East Main Street, the blue building at 1 E. Main St., the Dollar Bargain building on East Main Street and another building at 9 W. Main St.

Council approved another development plan, by formally committing to provide \$1.5 million in matching funds to a \$3 million downtown capital improvement project.

The city is asking for \$1.5 million from the capital budget.

The project includes acquiring and renovating vacant buildings, allowing parking on one side of Main Street, converting the Penn Street parking lot into a two or three level garage, further development of the State Theatre for the Arts, offering rent incentives for restaurants and specialty shops and improving building exteriors.

The city plans to use \$900,000 in Community Development Block Grant funds and projects for most its matching funds, but has to come up with another \$600,000.

In other business, council gave permission to the Uniontown Area High School Bible Club, Laurel Highland High School Bible Club and Penn Highlands Teens for Christ to erect a statue honoring two fallen city firemen at the intersection of South Mount Vernon Avenue and Pittsburgh Street.

The statue, which will cost \$75,000 to build and set into place with a crane, will honor Chief Lewis Williams and Fireman Voight LaClair.

Lewis died of a heart attack while on the way home from battling the last of three fires one day in 1901. He died in front of St. Peter's Episcopal Church on Morgantown Street.

LaClair was killed March 13, 1914, while fighting a fire at the McClelland Hotel on West Main Street. First National Bank now stands on that site.

The Rev. Peter Malik, who runs the Bible groups, said the seven-foot-tall bronze statue will have plaques with the firemen's names and rest on a granite base.

Donations can be made to the Chief Williams Hook and Ladder Company, care of the Uniontown Fire Department, 84 North Gallatin Ave., Uniontown, Pa., 15401. Donations of \$500 and \$1,000 will be recognized on a display.

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