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### Brownsville leaders to weigh bike arena development proposal

Sunday, October 01, 2006

By Cindi Lash, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

BROWNSVILLE, Pa In a years-long quest to attract development and revive the sagging Dust Bowl that is its Downtown, Brownsville has had hopes raised and hopes dashed.

The "Williamsburg on the Mon" historic theme park? Never happened. Neither did the shopping strip or the Indian gambling casino that was supposed to draw thousands of tourists to the once-vibrant Fayette County river town.

Now Brownsville's leaders are considering yet another proposal to revitalize their historic but down-at-the-heel Market Street business district: an indoor bicycle arena to train cyclists and hold races.

Proponents of the plan, including leaders of the Brownsville Area Chamber of Commerce, have argued that the velodrome and adjacent parking garage could be the catalyst they've sought to revive a town

drained by the demise of industry and to lure back some of the 20,000 people who once made homes here.

The plan shown last month to Brownsville officials depicted a complex on properties bordering and east of Market Street, including the sites of the U.S. Post Office, the Public Library, an American Legion post and a handful of the few remaining Downtown businesses.

Other details of the plan, including its cost, the identity of its developers, and sources of financing, have not been disclosed.

But Brownsville Council last week gave approval for CB Richard Ellis in Pittsburgh, a real estate brokerage and management firm representing the developer, to determine how much a feasibility study of the project would cost.

Local officials said that because they would not have to pay for the analysis or study, they are eager to listen and learn more about the project. They said they were told it would include a covered 250-meter oval wood track built to standards required for Olympic- and world-class track cycling races and training facilities for elite cyclists.

There are about 20 velodromes in the United States but only one, in Carson, Calif., that meets those indoor standards, according to USA Cycling, the national governing body for the sport. The well-known Lehigh Valley Velodrome in Trexlertown, Pa., is an outdoor facility.

Mayor Lewis Hosler said he believes interest in cycling is on an upswing, and the facility would attract college events as well as athletes and spectators who would patronize local businesses.

"It can't hurt to listen," he said. "I just want something to bring us out of this position and make us prosperous again."

But he and other officials said their hope remains tempered by caution, given their experience with unfulfilled past proposals.

For much of the past 15 years, this Fayette County town of about 2,800 people also has been at odds with Ernest E. and Marilyn Liggett, the Churchill couple who bought up more than 100 properties in the early 1990s and announced various plans to develop their real estate for shopping and gambling.

None of those things happened, leaving Brownsville to battle for years with the Liggetts and corporations they operate over unpaid taxes and fines for thousands of dollars in repeated building code violations.

"The concept of it, and council agrees unanimously on this, is intriguing. We all agree that we do need something, and if you have a draw, the surrounding communities will get a boost from it," Council President Jack Lawver said. "We're not against development, but we'd like to know who we're working with."

So would many Brownsville residents, who have been asking if the Liggetts, who own property in the area proposed for the velodrome, are  
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week. Nor did Ernest Liggett and his attorney, Lee Grimm of Pittsburgh.

Tom Andrews, a spokesman for Rep. DeWeese, said private developers approached Rep. DeWeese's staff within the last six months. Mr. Andrews would not disclose their identity and said he did not know whether the Liggetts were involved.

Rep. DeWeese has not been involved directly in those discussions, and the state has not committed to providing any funding for the project, Mr. Andrews said. The capital budget is a wish list of potential projects that may or may not be funded and that require matching funds, he said.

Jo Lofstead, another aide to Rep. DeWeese who attended presentations about the project, said that Mr. Norris said Mr. Liggett had approached CB Richard Ellis about managing his Brownsville properties. But she said Mr. Norris said that inquiry was coincidental and unrelated to the velodrome project.

USA Cycling is not involved with the project and did not know about it until last week, spokesman Andy Lee said. He said the organization does not build velodromes but would provide consulting assistance if asked.

Mr. Lee said he frequently hears about plans for new velodromes but knows of none that have been built in recent years. The Lehigh Valley facility is the hotbed of track cycling in the eastern United States and has produced a number of Olympic-level riders but cannot accommodate athletes who want to train year-round, he said.

"We'd welcome it from standpoint that it's in our best interest to expose more people to track cycling. We'd be happy to see it if it's a solid business model and presents opportunities for kids."

Brownsville is preparing for a hearing Oct. 26 in which officials will seek to persuade a judge to order the Liggetts to pay fines and possibly serve jail terms for failing to repair or clean up trash on 11 of their most dilapidated Downtown properties.

Most of those properties are in the Market Street strip, including a commercial structure at 17-19 Market that has been condemned. The properties were cited last year by Code Enforcement Officer Donald Baugh for broken foundations, windows and other building code violations.

The Liggetts appealed to Common Pleas Judge Steve Leskinen after District Judge Ronald Haggerty found them guilty of those violations. Earlier this year, they also appealed other citations written for those properties on different dates to Common Pleas Judge Ralph Warman.

Judge Warman dismissed that batch of citations in September because the borough did not present its building code to demonstrate the violations existed, but noted that the borough could refile the citations, Brownsville Solicitor Melinda Dellarose said.

District Attorney Nancy D. Vernon has joined the case and has said she will ask Judge Leskinen to consider a jail term if he upholds citations before him, Ms. Dellarose said. Mrs. Vernon got involved, even though the citations are summary offenses, because of the unusual nature of a case involving so many uncorrected violations, the solicitor said.

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*Correction/Clarification: (Published Oct. 2, 2006) Brownsville leaders are reviewing a proposal for an indoor bicycle arena. Their position was stated incorrectly in a headline that originally accompanied this article as published Oct. 1, 2006.*

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(Cindi Lash can be reached at [clash@post-gazette.com](mailto:clash@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1973. )

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