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Brownsville revitalization gains state help

By Amy Zalar , Herald-Standard

A revitalization initiative begun several years ago by the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority and aimed at improving blighted downtown Brownsville has been awarded \$2 million in funding to continue the efforts through a state program.

During Tuesday's Fayette County Redevelopment Authority meeting, the authority approved a contract with the state to provide the \$2 million funding through the Department of Community and Economic Development Main Street Growing Greener II Program to support the Brownsville targeted revitalization initiative.

In related action, the authority approved a redevelopment proposal for the Brownsville Borough Redevelopment project. The proposal, which must ultimately be approved by the Fayette County commissioners before being implemented by the authority, was not immediately available.

However, executive director Andrew French explained the funding and plan center around taking a more aggressive approach for the acquisition of certain properties. Plans are to demolish some properties and revitalize others, French said.

"This is the first influx of funding to start the process," French said.

French said the effort involves 30 properties in downtown Brownsville. He explained that the authority has been working in the borough for several years and the latest initiative began when Gov. Ed Rendell provided money for code enforcement and making a redevelopment plan. French said when Rendell visited Brownsville a few years ago he said he would be back and now more money is on the way for Brownsville.

The plan involves acquiring properties, as well as some demolition. French said Brownsville Borough Council meets next week and will likely be taking action as well.

"We can't do what we want until we have control," French said.

Ernest Liggett owns a number of properties in downtown Brownsville, and Liggett has been in court numerous times for failure to bring the properties up to code.

In approving the contract and proposal, board member Dee John said she thinks the initiative is exciting, adding that \$2 million for Brownsville is a lot of money.

French explained that before the proposal can be implemented the county commissioners must hold a public meeting. Once approved by the commissioners, the redevelopment authority will implement the plan.

French said it has been about 20 years since the authority has undertaken a "traditional redevelopment project" such as the Brownsville initiative. He said Brownsville's problems are known throughout the state and Brownsville has been targeted as a case study.

In addition to John praising the effort, board member Rob Sleighter told French he thinks it great what French is trying to do with the borough.

In other action, the authority tabled a motion to execute a contract for engineering services for the Brownsville Borough Market Street Enhancement Project with Pennoni Associates Inc. of Uniontown. The contract, for engineering services for the Brownsville Borough Market Street Enhancement Project, didn't include a total cost.

John said she was concerned that a final amount was not included in the draft. The board told French they would hold a special meeting if needed to approve the contract once the amount is calculated.

French said the contract is for sidewalk and utility work, as well as landscaping.

The authority voted to appoint attorney Herb Margolis as authority solicitor for 2008. In making the appointment, authority Chairman Ken Finney presented Margolis with a framed certificate recognizing the fact that Margolis has been solicitor for the authority for 50 years- since Jan. 31, 1958.

The authority also voted to enter into a contract with attorney Simon John for legal services on an as-needed basis. Finney, Ross DiMarco and James Wolesslagle voted in favor of the motion, while Dee John and Sleighter abstained. Dee John said she is related to

Simon John through her husband and Sleighter said Simon John is his brother in law.

The authority approved a contract with Maher Duessel of Pittsburgh for auditing services for three years, with a cost of \$17,500 for the first year; \$18,375 for the second year and \$19,300 for the third year.

French said the pay increases represent about 5 percent each year. He said the firm has done the authority's audit since 2002, and no other companies responded to a request for qualifications.

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