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Thursday, July 31, 2008

## Brownsville proposal approved by county

By Amy Zalar, Herald-Standard  
03/28/2008  
Updated 03/29/2008 12:06:04 AM EDT

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The Fayette County commissioners gave approval Thursday to an ambitious redevelopment proposal that addresses the blighted downtown area of Brownsville.

James Lawver, a member of Brownsville Borough Council, spoke in favor of adoption of the plan before the vote, saying it is a positive step that would encourage businesses to locate in Brownsville.

The commissioners unanimously approved the plan, which also has been approved by the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority and Brownsville council. The project calls for the public acquisition of 30 downtown properties.

The plan calls for selective demolition on nine parcels; site improvements, such as sidewalk and lighting improvements; and the relocation of two businesses and the occupants of one residence.

Andrew French, executive director of the redevelopment authority, previously said the \$2.1 million plan, which already has received a \$2 million state grant, includes \$566,000 for acquisition; \$505,100 for demolition and site improvements; \$150,000 for relocation; \$700,000 for property protection, maintenance and improvements; and \$255,000 for professional services and administrative costs.

Ernest Liggett of Monroeville, along with his wife and several of their companies, owns 22 of the 30 properties slated for acquisition by the redevelopment authority through the plan. At a public hearing earlier this month, Liggett was the only one who spoke against the plan.

During public comment, a pastor of a Brownsville church urged the commissioners to hold off on the vote, saying the two plans (the redevelopment plan and Liggett's plan) haven't been made clear. The pastor said Liggett has a plan to bring a velodrome (bicycling arena) to Brownsville, adding he has 402 signatures of support for that plan.

The pastor said he wants the "politics of hate" to cease, saying the people of Brownsville have been held hostage.

The Rev. Alexander Jalso, a member of the Greater Brownsville Area Chamber of Commerce, said a feasibility study for the velodrome was discussed in 2006 and was supposed to be completed in 2007, but it wasn't. He said until the study is done, no discussions should occur about the velodrome.

Commission Chairman Vincent Zapotosky said he has the best interest of the people at heart and a "non-progressive landlord" has held Brownsville hostage since 1992.

Commissioner Vincent A. Vicites said something has to be done about Brownsville.

"I think the stagnation has stagnated long enough," Vicites said.

French said the redevelopment authority has been working with Brownsville council for several years and \$2 million has been allocated to implement the proposal.

When asked by Commissioner Angela M. Zimmerlink if the plan specifically addresses development, French said the proposal "is focused on addressing blighting influences."

Zimmerlink said private development could then occur in the borough.

"This is a very long, hard road we are embarking on. Brownsville didn't fall into a cave overnight and we can't get out overnight. This is the first step," French said.

Zimmerlink said she doesn't believe state tax money should be used for such a purpose. However, she said the commissioners are being asked to approve the proposal because of a state requirement. Zimmerlink said she would vote in favor of the plan if fair market value and not eminent domain were used for acquisition.

Zapotosky said every avenue would be exhausted, including eminent domain, but added that fair market value must be offered if that route is taken.

Vicites made the motion, pointing out that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has agreed to help, and officials, including Gov. Ed Rendell, even visited Brownsville.

Zapotosky seconded the motion, saying these are Fayette tax dollars and he is glad they are not going to another county.

Updated 03/29/2008 12:06:04 AM EDT

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