

Comeback for Brownsville? - Authority hears ideas to revitalize blighted downtown

By Amy Revak Herald-Standard | Posted: Wednesday, March 2, 2011 12:00 am

At least three civic-minded representatives of Brownsville believe there still can be a resurgence of the borough's decaying downtown area, but acknowledge it will take work.

The three brought some of their ideas about how to revitalize the blighted downtown to the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority board meeting on Tuesday.

Norma Ryan, the borough's former mayor, said there has been interest in turning some of the recently acquired downtown properties into a variety of businesses. She said a wellness center, antiques store and the relocation of the pharmacy were among the proposals that have been pitched.

Ryan said some of the studies that were done when she was mayor zeroed in on the architecture of the downtown area, and that if the facades could be preserved, Brownsville could look like Winter Park, Fla., where the old facades remain but the insides of the buildings are new.

It previously was said that Brownsville would make for a good setting for a television show about a town trying to make a comeback.

Ryan also said an idea was proposed for a veterans home in the downtown.

"There is a lot of energy that needs to be explored," Ryan said.

Ryan said she would like to develop a team to help the authority with moving ahead with decisions on the properties. She suggested that if a potential buyer doesn't make improvements to a building in two years, they lose their money.

Authority member Ray Polaski said he likes the idea of making potential buyers answer questions before they get to the authority.

The redevelopment authority has been working on acquiring the blighted properties in the downtown, officially known as the Brownsville Redevelopment Project, for several years. The area was declared as blighted last year.

The authority's executive director, Andrew French, said the authority recently took possession of eight properties formerly owned by Manor Investments Ltd., operated by Ernest and Marilyn Liggett of Monroeville, and work continues to acquire other properties.

Acquiring the properties is a step toward fulfilling a rehabilitation project in downtown Brownsville, the authority noted. Six of the properties are located on Market Street and one each is located on Brownsville Avenue and Albany Road.

Mayor Lester Ward said he is interested in bringing life back to the downtown. He echoed Ryan's sentiment about buyers moving ahead quickly. He said buyers should have a plan in place, hit the ground running and show marked improvements within two years.

"The thing is what can we do to bring Brownsville back?" Ward said. "We want it safe, clean and green and not to see a dead town."

Ward said he would love to save some of the building facades also, but if they have to be torn down, they should be prepared to do what must be done for progress.

Resident Jim Lawver said they have to look at what is most marketable in the town, which is namely the Monongahela River. He said the population of the town has declined from 2,800 to 2,500, and something is needed to bring people back.

"We don't have 20 years," Lawver said.

Authority member Dee John said the authority understands what is happening in the town and wants to see a resurgence occur.

"We have an investment in the community with our hearts and our minds," John said.

The authority's \$2.1 million revitalization project, which received a \$2 million state grant, includes \$566,000 for acquisition of the properties, \$505,100 for demolition and site improvements, \$150,000 for relocation, \$700,000 for property protection, maintenance and improvements and \$225,000 for professional services and administrative costs.

The Liggetts own 22 of the 30 properties slated for acquisition by the redevelopment authority.

In a related matter, the board voted Tuesday to potentially institute a lawsuit against the authority's insurance carrier for not covering legal fees when the Liggetts unsuccessfully sued the authority for taking the properties.

The authority paid out \$77,000 for legal work relating to the lawsuit. The authority held an executive session prior to Tuesday's meeting to discuss the potential litigation.

In agenda items, the authority voted to enter into a contract for auditing services with Maher Duessel of Pittsburgh for the fiscal years 2010-2014. French said the firm has been conducting audits for the authority for the past several years. The total cost is \$106,250, with the first audit costing \$19,250 and the price going up \$1,000 each year until the 2014 audit, when the price will be \$23,250. It was one of two proposals received for the auditing services.

The authority ratified a contract for \$40,000 with Construction Engineering Consultants Inc. of Pittsburgh for geotechnical investigation, engineering, testing and inspection services related to the fill area development at the Fayette County Business Park.

French said the contract is needed to ensure the fill is placed properly and for inspections and core drillings.

The authority approved three contracts relating to the Route 381 resurfacing property in Ohiopyle, which includes resurfacing, pavement markings and signage improvements. The contracts are: \$31,708 with Sucevic, Piccolomini and Kuchar Engineering Inc. of Uniontown for supplemental construction consultation services; \$83,935 with Hill International Inc. of Large for construction inspection services and \$984,346 with Donegal Construction Corp. of Greensburg for the contract.



John F. Brothers

0302 downtownbrown 3 JFB

A pedestrian strolls along Market Street properties in Brownsville that have been taken over by the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority. John F. Brothers/Herald-Standard