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28 Brownsville parcels targeted for redevelopment proposals

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Marketing a downtown with shuttered storefronts and blighted structures is no easy undertaking.

The Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County is taking on that task through a recent request for development proposals for Brownsville's commercial district.

The 28 properties, primarily on Market and Front streets and Brownsville Avenue, include the Union Station, a former drugstore, hardware store, funeral home, church and numerous vacant lots.

Included are 22 parcels formerly owned by Allegheny County developers Ernest and Marilyn Liggett, and acquired through eminent domain.

The other six properties were acquired through other means, including tax sales, said redevelopment authority executive director Andrew French.

"We have been going through the process of getting possession for a long time. Our primary goal is to deal with the blight that exists downtown," French said.

"But are there interested developers out there with realistic, feasible proposals for these properties?" French said.

The borough controls four properties in the targeted area.

Most of the available properties' use would be a combination of commercial and retail, possibly with some housing on upper floors, French said.

The redevelopment authority, National Road Heritage Corridor and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission recently completed an analysis of the historic district's boundaries and structural properties, as well as a community market analysis.

What might initially appear to be a hard sell has a few upsides, several observers have noted.

NRHC executive director Donna Holdorf has called Brownsville a "key location on the Historic National Road," citing the French and Indian War, development of transportation routes and riverboats, the Industrial Revolution and the era of coal and coke.

On Tuesday, Court Gould, executive director of Sustainable Pittsburgh, said the area's potential for tourism, along with being a "river town," could draw developers to Brownsville.

"Many towns would die to have riverfront amenities, (the opportunity) to create a promenade, have outdoor cafes," he said.

"People have tight heartstrings for old coal towns like Brownsville and dream about being on the ground floor" of their transformation, Gould said.

In 2010, Sustainable Pittsburgh published a report on blight and abandonment in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Seeing the glass as half empty, Gould said, is missing part of the picture.

"There is great opportunity in those parcels," he said.

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There is a national values shift back to old Main Street communities, he said.

“People desire to have it all in a downtown corridor — worship, work, play. Clearly, there have to be jobs available,” Gould said.

But jobs are not among the lures available to potential Brownsville developers.

Most recent USACityFacts data shows the community of 2,331 had an unemployment rate of 14.1 percent in 2010.

The poverty rate was nearly 30 percent, and the median income was \$22,478.

Over the past 20 years, the Liggetts acquired more than 100 properties encompassing 170 acres in Brownsville that they said they intended to develop commercially.

In 2009, the redevelopment authority filed a declaration of taking on 22 of the blighted properties.

The county planning commission and board of commissioners ultimately approved their acquisition through eminent domain.

Posted on the authority's website are the particulars required with proposal submissions.

Included are project development, type of unit planned, construction plans, financing and marketing.

Projects incorporating green building techniques and those with committed tenants will be given preference.

A proposal review team will evaluate submissions as they are received, with final selection approved by the redevelopment authority and the borough.

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