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Home > News > Archives

Tuesday, January 09, 2007

MH/MR officials proceeding with building plans

By Amy Karpinsky, Herald-Standard
06/22/2003

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Despite a delay in the construction of a new Fayette County Mental Health/Mental Retardation building, the agency is moving ahead with architectural plans, according to an MH/MR official.

Although the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority first approved a proposal from MH/MR to purchase property at the Fayette County Business Park, located along Route 40, nearly a year ago and approved final design plans last November, the property has yet to change hands and ground has not been broken at the site.

However, MH/MR director Lisa Ferris-Kusniar said Friday that the agency will meet with engineers this week to develop bid specifications for the project.

"We will not have it as early as we wanted, but now we're full speed ahead with (architect Michael S.) Molnar," she said.

Ferris-Kusniar explained that complications arose with the purchase agreement from the redevelopment authority when it was determined that a standard agreement wouldn't work. MH/MR had planned to pay \$76,000 to the authority for 4.76 acres of property, 2 acres of which are considered "buildable."

However, since that time the agreement has been "bounced back and forth" among attorneys, Ferris-Kusniar said.

The redevelopment authority is not permitted to resell the property to a county agency, because the county formerly owned the land, she said.

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MH/MR will still pay for the property, but the agreement will state that the agency will pay for infrastructure at the site, such as road construction and grading. The final holdup is that MH/MR is asking for a guarantee that the road will be completed when the building is finished.

"It is more of a semantics issue," she said, adding that the agreement should be approved soon.

As for moving ahead with construction, Ferris-Kusniar said the agency has state and federal funding in place for the \$2.8 million building.

She said what the MH/MR pays in rent can amply cover the mortgage.

The agency occupies part of the second floor of the Health Center building, the entire eighth floor of the National City Bank building and a portion of the second floor of the National City Bank building, and it also rents a conference room and storage space in the National City Bank building.

The agency plans to borrow another \$200,000, because that money was re-diverted into services last June, due to shortfalls, Ferris-Kusniar said.

She said that once bid specifications are complete, the project will be let out for bid in August or September, and the building will be completed about a year-and-a-half after construction begins, which could be in early 2005.

Ferris-Kusniar said the two-story building with a partial basement will contain approximately 22,500 square feet.

The building will feature a 2 1/2-story open lobby with a large atrium space and a glass skylight in the entranceway.

"We want the first impression to be dynamic," Ferris-Kusniar said. "We're excited about it. The staff is excited."

Other features include public conference areas around the atrium in the front and private offices around the perimeter of the building.

The "core facilities" will be located in the middle of the floors.

The agency employs about 70 full-time staff members.

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