

Brownsville rehabilitation costly but not impossible

By Christine Haines HeraldStandard.com | Posted: Tuesday, November 6, 2012 2:00 am

It would cost an estimated \$33 million to completely rehabilitate the 18 buildings in Brownsville's downtown historic district now owned by the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority.

That's according to a study prepared of the area required by the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission since the area is on the National Register of Historic Places. A summary of the study was presented to the community Monday evening.

According to Donna Holdorf, executive director of the National Road Heritage Corridor, the study included four components: resurveying the historic district to assess changes since it was recognized in 1993; provide a market analysis to identify future occupants; a structural analysis and cost estimates for stabilization; and rehabilitation and a set of voluntary guidelines to maintain the character of the district in the future.

"We've been engaged in a redevelopment project in downtown Brownsville for quite a long time. When we started, I told everybody this was going to be a very long, hard and difficult process," said Andrew French, executive director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority.

French said the authority doesn't have \$33 million to completely rehabilitate the downtown buildings.

"We are at a crossroads. We need to make some difficult decisions," French said.

Using information from the study and consulting with borough officials, French said the redevelopment authority would most likely make recommendations for selective demolition within the next two to four weeks.

"We understand that there is going to be selective demolition and not every building is going to remain. A vacant lot can be just as dangerous and just as unattractive as what is standing now," Holdorf said.

Tracy Zinn of T&B Planning, one of the companies that worked on the plan, said having continuous storefronts is a significant character element of downtown Brownsville.

“If a building were to be demolished in the middle of the row, the guidelines say there has to be a defined use of the open space,” Zinn said.

Zinn said it is easier to maintain character integrity of historic districts when selective demolition occurs at the ends of the district instead of in the middle.

Zinn said the structural analysis of the downtown buildings indicates that it may be feasible to gut some of the buildings while salvaging the facades.

“The determination was the exterior walls of nearly all the buildings were stable,” Zinn said.

Holdorf noted that there have also been successful rehabilitation models in which the first two floors of a building have been rehabilitated for reuse, while upper floors were mothballed for future renovation as money is available.

“Some of these buildings can be occupied with just minimal improvements, with additional work done over time,” Holdorf said.

Realistically, French said, additional demolition will still take place.

“Our whole goal with this project was to take care of the blight that exists,” French said. “Unfortunately, with the cost of renovation, there’s going to have to be some further demolition.”

French said the redevelopment authority currently has about \$800,000 to use toward demolition and stabilization of the downtown properties. The money is part of a grant that must be used by the end of 2013.

Several buildings adjacent to the Market Street parking lot were torn down this summer and the space is going to be used for a community park and stage area as designed by a group of local high school students. French encouraged community support for that project, which he said is a visible, positive step toward the revitalization of the downtown.

“Our residents are our salesmen. If you can’t get the residents on board, we’re dead in the water,” said Brownsville Borough Council President Jack Lawver.



Joel Brewton/HeraldStandard.com

Brownsville announces plans to preserve historical district

Tracy Zinn of the T&B Planning goes over the results of the Brownsville Commercial Historic District Project at a public meeting Monday evening at Sons of Italy in Brownsville.