

Group working to revitalize Brownsville

By Mike Tony For the Herald-Standard | Posted: Sunday, December 28, 2014
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Brownsville is one of the most historically important towns in Pennsylvania, but it may also be one of the most dilapidated.

“We know Brownsville wasn’t built in one day and so rebuilding Brownsville isn’t going to happen overnight,” Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation (BARC) treasurer Norma Ryan said. “We didn’t go down overnight, and we’re not going to come back overnight.”

BARC has been laying the groundwork for such a comeback for the past 25 years, often literally.

“Our main goal is to help the community revitalize,” said Ryan, former mayor of Brownsville and a founding member of BARC. “So one of the easy ways to help revitalization is to fix the buildings and encourage people to come here and live.”

So BARC is in the process of renovating two buildings located at 27 and 29 Market St. in Brownsville’s national historical district located downtown, a process known as BARC’s Keystone Project that began three years ago. The 29 Market building had previously been slated for demolition until BARC successfully presented a proposal to the Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County to acquire the property and refurbish it.

“They’re beautiful buildings,” BARC board president Tami Sealy said of the Market Street block and the rest of Brownsville’s downtown district. “It’s just unfortunate that through a series of landowners they were relegated to decay.”



Brownsville Storefront Revitalization

Amanda Steen | Herald-Standard
Crews from American construction and Jendoco work on restorations inside a historic building at 27 Market St. in downtown Brownsville. The project is funded through BARC which receives money from grants and fundraisers.

Ryan hopes that renovation of 27 Market St. will be completely renovated by spring 2015. Brownsville Family Pharmacy, which is currently located at 25 Market St., will move next door to occupy the location upon its completion.

Construction on 29 Market St. was slated to begin in late 2013 but halted after its roof collapsed. BARC called upon Jendoco Construction to stabilize the building following the roof collapse. Sealy said that she hopes that the 29 Market renovation will be complete shortly after the new year and is weather-dependent.

Funders of the Keystone Project include the Community Foundation of Fayette County, the Allegheny Foundation and the Heinz Endowment.

Ryan says that it normally costs roughly \$500,000 to renovate buildings, though the roof collapse at 29 Market St. will likely increase the final cost of that stabilization.

“There is a benefit to the community of finding nice, clean renovated rental spaces,” Sealy said. “With the gas industry booming in Brownsville, it would be a benefit to the town not only for economic revitalization but jobs and housing.”

Ryan added that Brownsville is in especially dire need of residential housing.

“We have Brownsville Marine Products employing people and still need 200 people, and they’re always looking for places to rent,” Ryan added. “Brownsville has Teleperformance, which is a call center. They’re constantly looking for people. When they hire somebody, they’re looking locally.”

BARC’s efforts to convert the Market Street block into downstairs commercial space and upstairs residential apartments aren’t the organization’s first major renovation project, as it also renovated the Flatiron Building, transforming it into Heritage Center museum and the Frank L. Melega Art Museum.

“Instead of tearing down, fix up what you have,” Sealy said.