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Authority outlines blight strategy

By Christine Haines, Herald-Standard
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A public hearing on the proposed Brownsville redevelopment project that calls for the public acquisition of 30 downtown properties drew an audience of approximately 40 people, with 16 providing sworn testimony.

The plan calls for selective demolition on nine parcels, site improvements such as sidewalk and lighting improvements and the relocation of two businesses and the occupants of one residence. According to Andrew French, the executive director of the Redevelopment Authority, the \$2.1 million plan, which has already received a \$2 million state grant, includes \$566,000 for acquisition, 505,100 for demolition and site improvements, \$150,000 for relocation, \$700,000 for property protection, maintenance and improvements and \$255,000 for professional services and administrative costs.

Ernest Liggett, along with his wife and several of their companies, owns 22 of the 30 properties slated for acquisition by the Redevelopment Authority through the redevelopment plan. Liggett has been identified in court documents as an "investment landowner in the Borough of Brownsville." His mailing address is in Monroeville.

Brownsville Council president Jack Lawver presented a letter of support for the plan from the council, as well as letters from two borough residents who were unable to attend the public hearing.

"We feel that this proposal by the redevelopment authority has merit and has what it takes to move Brownsville forward," Lawver said.

Sister James Ann Germuska of Crosskeys Human Services said her agency is in full support of the proposal.

"I'd love to see Brownsville revitalized again. I came here 33 years ago and there were stores downtown then. I'd love to see that again," Germuska said.

"The acquisition and rehabilitation of these dilapidated properties in the center of our town is long overdue," said Tracy Sheehan Zivkovich, a member of Brownsville Borough Council and the Brownsville Area Revitalization Corp. "Our community is filled with history and pride. That selective demolition allows us to use our historic structures into the future."

Several people did express concerns about a mission currently located in the first floor of the Union Station Building, one of the buildings slated for acquisition. French said any businesses, organizations or individuals displaced by the project would be relocated at the redevelopment authority's expense, in compliance with the law.

David Waters, the pastor of the mission, asked if the properties would be made available for purchase from the redevelopment authority.

"I asked Mr. Liggett a year ago if it would be possible for us to purchase the Union Station Building. If we did, we could put in housing for the elderly. There are 56 or 58 apartments there," Waters said. "Could we purchase the building? Mr. Liggett refused to sell it to us. He said he wanted to sell the whole town."

French said it was premature to discuss future use of the structures at this time. The first issue is acquisition to address the blighted conditions.

"The key is there is blight in Brownsville. All of the people who spoke tonight except Mr. Liggett want the blight gone," said Herb Margolis, the solicitor for the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority.

"Mr. Liggett is as interested as anyone in getting rid of the blight. He did not buy these properties to allow them to deteriorate," said Liggett's attorney Lee F. Grimm Jr.

Liggett testified at length during the hearing and presented the commissioners with a 107-page document outlining his recommendation that the redevelopment plan be rejected. Liggett noted that there have been numerous developments proposed for Brownsville over the years, long before he began purchasing properties in the community in 1992.

Liggett stated that he and his wife are being held to a different standard than others who have tried to accomplish positive things in the borough but have failed. The document he presented to the commissioners includes a detailed report on his efforts to attract USA Cycling, an Olympic-related organization, to Brownsville through his Marketplace project which would maintain the historic facades of the downtown buildings while creating a continuous indoor mall environment by opening up the interiors of the buildings.

Liggett also contends there are numerous errors in the redevelopment document in violation of the Urban Redevelopment Law, violating his constitutional rights, including the right to due process under the 14th Amendment.

"If we were to consider this a traditional real estate transaction...there is no way this conversion would take place at a closing table," Liggett said. "The Liggetts are not interested in seeing six percent of their total holdings disposed of in this manner."

Liggett said 100 percent of his holdings, a total of 148 parcels in the borough, are available to the first and best offer, if the community is not interested in becoming an Olympic venue.

Redevelopment Authority executive director Andrew French said that he would review the redevelopment proposal along with the authority's solicitor, the county solicitor and the authority's planning consultant Lee Mueller of Mullin and Loneragan Associates. French said any revisions that are needed would be prepared in time for the commissioners to consider the redevelopment plan at their meeting on Thursday, March 27.

"The residents of Brownsville have without a doubt been the most patient group of people I've ever met," said Vince Zapotosky, the chairman of the commissioners. "My decision will be for Brownsville's future, for you, your children and grandchildren."