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Thursday, July 31, 2008

Support Brownsville redevelopment plan

03/27/2008
Updated 04/03/2008 12:06:04 AM EDT

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Everyone with a sincere interest in revitalizing downtown Brownsville should pay close attention to a \$2.1 million plan being advanced by the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority.

The largely state-funded plan includes money for acquiring 30 properties - including 22 essentially controlled by Ernest Liggett. The plan also calls for site improvements, demolition of nine parcels, property maintenance and protection, and relocation of two businesses.

During a recent public hearing, borough officials and citizens voiced support for the plan. Given Brownsville's long standing as a place of decline and stagnation, and the equally long list of revitalization ideas that have not come to fruition, any concrete plan deserves serious consideration.

Liggett, however, testified against the plan, even though it would affect only 6 percent of the 148 properties he or his companies own in the borough. He mentioned his efforts to get USA Cycling, an Olympic-related organization, to open a training facility in Brownsville, as proof of his interest in developing downtown.

Liggett, who started acquiring properties in 1992, has had a long time to do something. Granted, anyone desiring to redevelop a downtown such as Brownsville's is facing a daunting task. But when it starts to appear that you're throwing at a dart board for fresh ideas, with nothing ever taking root, you lose credibility.

This much is certain: Downtown Brownsville is blighted, and as such appears to qualify for the type of effort being mounted by the redevelopment authority - which essentially is to take control of the properties by eminent domain.

Herbert Margolis, solicitor for the redevelopment authority, says, "The key is there is blight in Brownsville. All of the people who spoke tonight (at the public hearing) except Mr. Liggett want the blight gone."

Liggett's attorney Lee F. Grimm Jr. says his client "is as interested as anyone in getting rid of the blight." Grimm also says, "He did not buy these properties to allow them to deteriorate." But isn't that exactly what has happened during Liggett's tenure?

Unless Liggett is able to put a concrete plan on the table, one that has something tangible happening soon, the redevelopment authority plan should be allowed to proceed.

Liggett apparently doesn't want that to happen, as he attempted to obtain a court injunction to stop last week's public hearing from proceeding. Perhaps we should continue waiting for a velodrome or an Indian gambling casino or an outlet shops complex - or some combination of the three.

The Fayette County commissioners, who will consider the plan at their meeting today, should take the bird in the hand over the two (or three or four) in the Liggett bush.

Updated 04/03/2008 12:06:04 AM EDT
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