

Desperate for business, S. Bent burdened by messy problems

It once looked like a smart move by the city to take ownership of the S. Bent property by way of land court in mid-2006. With each passing day, though, there seems a dwindling likelihood that the site will anytime soon house a taxpaying entity to benefit the Chair City's coffers.

While willing to take a wait-and-see approach on S. Bent over all these years, I knew full well that it required time and money to cover demolition and cleanup. Recent images of the property, though, point to an array of other disturbing issues that could easily discourage prospective buyers about setting up shop there in the near future.

From massive mounds of illegally dumped trash to a building yet to be torn down that has been decimated by graffiti and other damage — along with a few people who have set up a tent to live on the property — the city finds itself in a holding pattern in the search for funds to finish the demolition and cleanup work.

"There are shards of glass sticking up (in windows), boards with nails sticking up," said City Councilor Dembrosky. "I was shocked at the number of access points (to the building), as we need to secure it ASAP."

In acknowledging the poor condition of the property's last remaining structure, Mayor Mark Hawke explained how quickly an unsecured building can degrade to the point of uselessness.

"There once was one building (on the property) that we wanted to save that was in very good shape," he said. "Then one glass window broke, and it took less than one month for the rest of the windows to break, after which the building burned down (soon after in 2008)."

Dembrosky noted that after she and Councilor Jim Johnson visited

S. Bent recently, each sent emails to a number of city officials, including Hawke, about their concerns about the property.

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Johnson's email, according to Dembrosky, cited that the "property has become a trash dump for old mattresses," and that with the open access to the lone building, it "would become a liability," to where he sought that it be made secure.

When told that the condition of the property had changed little over the last couple of weeks since their emails, Dembrosky added, "Is there a plan (to deal with it), because if you have had several weeks, you would think there now is a game plan (in place)."

Despite the disturbing state of the site, Hawke — while acknowledging the current issues at S. Bent — highlighted the progress made on the property, along with noting officials have indeed come up with a "game plan" to deal with the biggest issues.

"Our hand was forced (on obtaining the property through land court in 2006) as it was a quarter million of back taxes that weren't paid," said Hawke. "So far, 65 percent of the square footage has been torn down, as we have made significant headway (on demolition). We are also ordering 22 jersey barriers to block the driveways around the last remaining building, and

we've posted some surveillance signs, as we're trying to be as vigilant as possible."

It was less than a year ago in August when Robert Hubbard, then the city's director of planning and community development, talked about being encouraged that no further contamination was found on the site, tied to its long history of furniture making.

Since then, though, it seems as if there'd been little progress on finding a business to locate there, but Hawke said, "Developers are starting to poke their heads out of the woods, as there is an interest from one for the S. Bent property. We have been talking (with that developer) about it on and off for the last year, as they are testing the waters to see if it's the right location."

To Dembrosky, though, a sluggish economy is a significant reason why S. Bent is still in the city's hands.

"The economy plays a huge role in this, as you aren't getting too many expansions, and there isn't a lot of stability in jobs, so we are waiting for it to pass," she said. "Ten or 15 years ago, when the economy was great, people were more willing to crack open their wallets, whereby we'd be looking at a much different outcome."

With the prospect of a business coming to S. Bent still seemingly a ways off, the mayor argued that many of the property's current issues could nonetheless be minimized by any redevelopment work, beginning with a proposed solar project.

"Getting the solar project going would mean there would be people on the grounds and there's less likely to be extracurricular activities (such as breaking in to the lone building), but that has been stalled in the council the last couple of months," he said. "We need to get the developer in there. Progress begets progress. Why is it being held up? There's the



Courtesy photo

Concerns have been voiced over issues as the city-owned former S. Bent property, including trash dumping and graffiti.

thought that someone's view is being spoiled, but will it be better or worse if it's a solar facility, versus having homeless people living on the property?"

Prior to these issues coming to light, I'd advocated for the need for patience, even when recognizing an additional two years might be needed to obtain grant funding to handle the last demolition work. That patience, though, has begun to melt with the last of the season's snow, when it would have seemed the perfect opportunity to get a handle on some of the excessive dumping at S. Bent. While it would be obviously unreasonable to expect every last gum wrapper to be picked up on the grounds, it would behoove city officials to work toward catching rampant illegal dumpers to the

fullest extent of the law, as a means to discourage it elsewhere in the city.

"I think that the city departments have to do their jobs in order to clean it up, and it needs to be secured," said Dembrosky. "If they need money to secure the buildings, the mayor would need to send up a money order, and I would support that."

To Hawke, though, the city has already spent funds twice to board it up, to where he deemed a third time would add up to a poor investment.

Dembrosky though, argued that "I would expect that if you were spending money to secure the building, knowing that is taxpayer money being spent, that you would do it properly, and not inadequately" — even if she acknowl-

edged the challenge in securing the building, because "regardless what you do, people will find a way."

For Hawke, any consideration to redo the work fizzled once he received a cost estimate of up to \$80,000. "That (estimate) was insane, so our best solution is to tear it down," he said.

With there being no immediate plans to tear the structure down, though, Dembrosky said, "I don't know if there is any budget to make the building secure, but it can't be left as is ... that's unacceptable. Somebody is going to get hurt."

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