

Council divided over plans for former bank

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Port officials welcome proposed renovation of downtown building but skeptical about giving potential buyer more time

Port Washington businessman Gertjan van den Broek's plan to buy and renovate the dilapidated former M&I Bank building in downtown Port ran head-first into officials' frustrations with the current building owner Tuesday night.

The Common Council took no action on van den Broek's request to stay the raze order, in part because it was not on the agenda.

That means, unless aldermen call a special meeting to act on the matter, a demolition permit should be taken out Friday, with work to be completed by Feb. 17, in accordance with an agreement the city has with Port Harbor Investments, City Administrator Mark Grams said.

Van den Broek's plan to delay purchasing the building from Port Harbor Investments until late May seemed to provoke much of the controversy, despite the fact that he pledged to repair the exterior of the structure even before he owns the former bank.

Van den Broek previously said he planned to close the purchase Jan. 30.

"That, to me, is unacceptable," Mayor Scott Huebner said of the new closing date. "This situation keeps perpetuating. It has to end."

Ald. Dan Becker said the city needs assurance that changes will occur.

"This city does not need to go through another tourist season with the building in disrepair," Becker said.

"This body cannot keep moving forward on what-ifs and maybes. We need something concrete."

Ald. Mike Ehrlich expressed confidence van den Broek can redevelop the former bank, but said he is uncomfortable lifting a raze order while the building is still owned by Port Harbor Investments.

"My biggest concern is to have this other property owner have the building until May. They're a wild card," Ehrlich said. "If I'm going to do this (postpone the raze order), I want Gertjan to own the building."

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Van den Broek has agreed to put up a letter of credit to ensure the building facade is repaired by May 31, weather permitting, even if the purchase hasn't been completed by then, his attorney Bruce McInay said.

Last month, after time had run out for Port Harbor Investments to find a buyer for the building and was to raze the structure, the firm accepted a purchase offer from van den Broek's firm, Renew Port Holdings.

Van den Broek then asked the city to lift the raze order, saying it would be impossible to obtain financing for the purchase and needed renovations with the order in place. Aldermen gave him until Jan. 20 to decide if he would buy the building, staying the order until then.

But they made it clear they did not want the building to remain in its current state during the tourist season. Van den Broek's plan to repair the exterior of the structure is expected to be reviewed by the Plan Commission Thursday, Jan. 19.

Some aldermen said the city needs to work with van den Broek, saying he is not Port Harbor Investments and should not be tainted by the city's problems with the firm.

"It's not Gertjan who caused all this angst," Ald. Joe Dean said. "I think we need to take a deep breath and work with this guy. We have to be very careful and separate Mr. van den Broek and the unfortunate past history."

The city is smart enough to be able to write an agreement that will protect it and ensure the building is repaired in case the sale isn't consummated, Dean added.

"This is a whole new group," Ald. Burt Babcock said. "If the city tried to work with him, it might possibly happen."

Although van den Broek was out of town and could not be at Tuesday's council meeting, McInay told aldermen that he is committed to the project.

"He is working diligently to put financing in place," McInay said, especially for the interior renovations, which may be done in stages.

Aldermen also expressed frustration Tuesday with van den Broek's timeline, which doesn't call for the concept for the building to be finalized until mid-August, Plan Commission approval until late October and construction next spring.

Van den Broek has said he has conceptual plans for the building, but he needs to refine them and make sure they are the right fit before presenting them to the city.

"Show us what you've been working on," Becker said. "I don't care if 11 of (the dozen plans van

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den Broek said he had considered) are junk. Show us what you have in mind.”

Van den Broek’s architect Jim Read told aldermen that they spent the summer working on potential plans.

“We can’t put them in front of you until we know we can finance them. We can’t get financing with a raze order,” Read said, calling the situation a Catch 22.

“Now, we’re talking three months.”

The facade repairs are relatively minor, he said, telling aldermen that eight pieces of terra cotta are missing from the building.

“That’s not much,” Read said, adding that once the building is torn down the city will never get another historic structure in its place.

“It’s a wonderful building,” he said. “It means a lot to the city.”

While some aldermen said they are worried by what they called an 11th-hour plan to rescue the building, McInay said van den Broek had repeatedly made offers on the bank building previously. It was only in December that his offer to purchase was accepted and he could begin work in earnest.