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Port council agrees to lend $40,000 to business owners who want to convert vacant building into art gallery, hall

The Port Washington Common Council on Tuesday agreed to lend Blue Heron Artisan's Gallery LLC $40,000 from its revolving loan fund to help finance the purchase of the historic firehouse at the corner of Wisconsin and Pier streets.

The 20-year loan, which will help Betty and Jim Langford buy the building and renovate it as an art gallery and banquet hall, will have an interest rate of 1.625% interest, aldermen said.

In exchange for the loan, the couple agreed to create the equivalent of two full-time jobs, officials said.

The city agreed in December to sell the historic firehouse to the Langfords for $188,000. Although the sale was to be completed by the end of 2011, the couple ran into a financing glitch and the closing was delayed.

The council's action Tuesday paves the way for the couple to complete the purchase.

Betty Langford told aldermen Tuesday that the couple plan to create an informal gallery on the main floor where artists would rent space.

"The idea is to support the artists so they would have a place to sell and display their art," she said.

She has about 14 artists who are interested in the gallery, Langford said, adding the space

could accommodate 80 artisans.

On the lower level, the couple plan to create a banquet hall.

There's been a lot of interest in that space, Langford said. A music teacher is talking about renting space twice weekly, she said, and an exercise instructor is also looking to lease space.

The hall could also be rented for one-time events, including a shower planned for May, she said.

To help commemorate the building's roots as the city's firehouse, Langford said she will create an area to showcase the fire department and its history.

Langford said she plans to paint and install new floors in the building, which also needs a new furnace, attic insulation and upgrades to the electrical system.

"I think this is a great use for the building, and I think this will fit nicely in the fabric of downtown," Ald. Mike Ehrlich said.

People often talk about the need for a space for the arts, Mayor Scott Huebner said, and this would help meet that need.

"I think it's a step in the right direction," he said.

The historic firehouse was last used as the city's senior center. The center moved from the site to a new location in the former St. John's Church on Foster Street last summer.