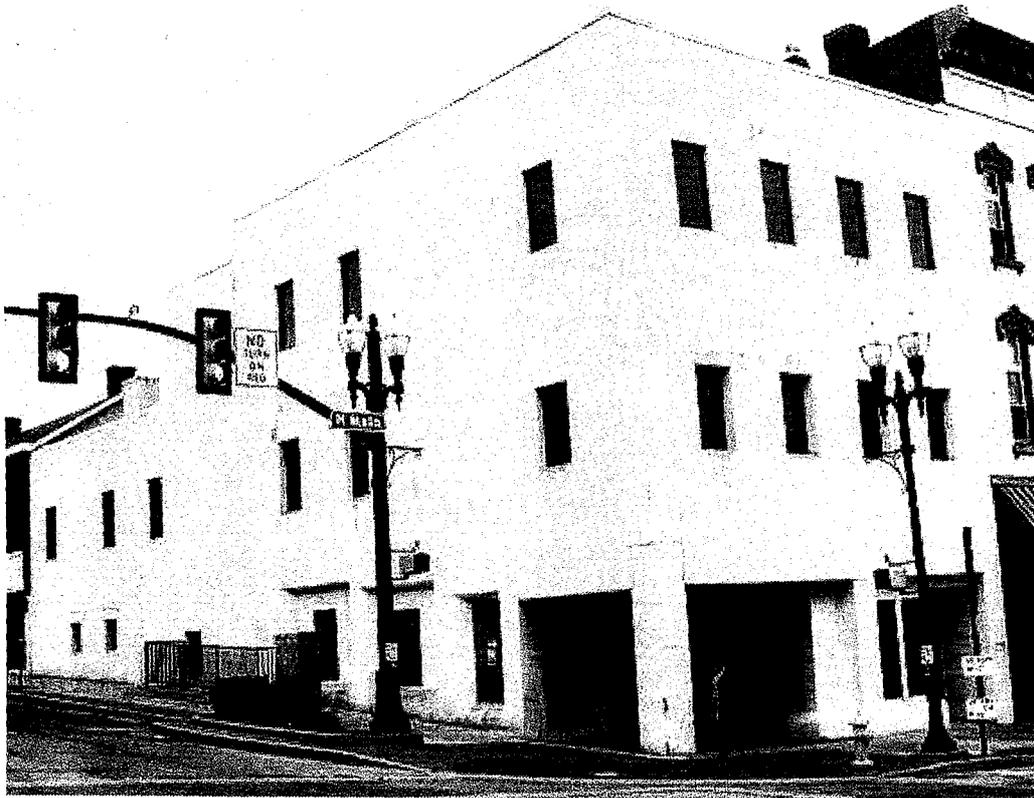


by Barbara Miller
Staff Writer
bmiller@observer-reporter.com



Washington Co.

Wednesday, March 19, 2014



Washington Mayor Brenda Davis, wearing the hat of a member of City Development Corp., asked the Washington County Commissioners for a hand in revitalizing a city marred by empty storefronts and vacant buildings.

“We need to begin acquiring these properties to gain some tax revenues,” Davis told commissioners

Wednesday morning at an agenda-setting session. “We’re striving to get properties back on the tax rolls again.”

Conversely, she said steps could include forgiving back taxes owed to the city, county and school district.

Commission Vice Chairman Diana Irey Vaughan said the county fielded requests from other municipalities, such as East Bethlehem Township and Charleroi, to forgive taxes – technically known

as exoneration – owed on private property within their boundaries, prompting the commissioners to develop a policy that would be uniform throughout the county.

“We are committed to economic development in this county,” Irey Vaughan said. “We are trying to come up with a policy so everyone is treated the same.

City Solicitor Jack Cambest emailed county Solicitor Lynn DeHaven about six weeks ago, according to DeHaven’s recollection, about the status of the vacant building owned by the late Washington County District Attorney John C. Pettit and Associates at 96 N. Main St., on the corner of East Chestnut Street. Pettit died Oct. 30, 2010.

“There’s a lot of information we do not have,” DeHaven said. “We don’t know what remaining partners there are.”

Debbie Bardella, county recorder of deeds and director of the tax revenue department, said the building was advertised for a tax claim sale held Sept. 23.

Though the amount of back taxes listed in August was \$25,066, liens filed by Portnoff Law Associates of Norristown as of Sept. 6 totaled \$124,958, which would have been added to the sale price. But that property did not appear on the auction block. Washington County Court ordered a 90-day stay.

“Nothing was paid up or nothing has happened in those 90 days,” Bardella said Wednesday. Barring payment of taxes owed or other intervention, “We will be taking the property to this September’s upset sale,” she continued.

The commissioners inquired of Bardella what amount was due. As of Wednesday, the total was \$6,225 in county taxes from 2011, 2012 and 2013.

“Only the commissioners can exonerate that,” Bardella said.

The commissioners bristled at the mayor’s suggestion they aren’t supportive enough of Washington, the county seat.

DeHaven noted after the meeting that the board, after resolving a dispute with the Washington Business District Authority in 2007, has paid a total of \$221,337 from county taxpayers for sidewalk and street lighting improvements, security and a Main Street manager in a 14-block area east of Franklin Street.

“We need to have taxes paid, especially when it comes to private enterprise,” said Commissioner Harlan Shober.

Davis said after her discussion with the commissioners that blight is not confined to the central business district, but includes residential areas, too. She noted that the City Development Corp. hopes to apply to the state Department of Community and Economic Development for a grant of \$500,000 to aid in its effort to revitalize.

Last year, the city was one of five communities selected as part of a private investment partnership by the the Allegheny Conference on Community Development.

The term “land bank” also came up as a rather new method to combat decay.

Legislation that took effect in December 2012 allows cities, counties, boroughs or townships, singly or combined, with populations of 10,000 or more to create what’s known as a land bank to acquire title to tax-delinquent properties, according to an article written last year by Keith L. Rolland, community development advisor to the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.

Without a method to take over decaying buildings, “properties may stay vacant for years with serious consequences for adjacent properties and the community,” Rolland wrote. “The legislation explicitly excludes eminent domain as a power of land banks.”

Davis said the city is likely about two years away from establishing a land bank.

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