

Building in historic district could be razed

Development could replace Cereal City Office Supply

Elizabeth Willis • *The Enquirer* • November 4, 2010

A building in the downtown historic district could be razed to make way for new development.

Battle Creek Unlimited has submitted a proposal to demolish the former Cereal City Office Supply at 50 W. Michigan Ave. BCU purchased the building for \$300,000 in December 2008, according to public records.

The decision goes before the city's Historic District Commission on Monday. The public meeting will be at 4 p.m. in Suite 220 of the Commerce Pointe Building, 77 E. Michigan Ave.

Karl Dehn, BCU president and chief executive officer, said the blighted building has no historic value and the land's potential use for new development or an events plaza outweighs the cost of renovating the building.

BCU had attempted to market the building for commercial and residential use, Dehn said, but added potentially expensive repairs to the building's mechanical systems turned developers off to the project.

"Sometimes new construction is a better option than renovating something that really has no value," he said.

Dehn acknowledged that some people might place sentimental value on the 51-year-old building.

"But we also have to look at today the needs of downtown, and demolishing a building doesn't eliminate memories of what went on there," he said. "When a building sits vacant and blighted, it doesn't enhance those memories either."

The building is a contributing structure to the city's historic central business district, said Susan Bedsole, Battle Creek's director of licensing and compliance, and Christine Hilton, the city's planning supervisor.

When the historic district was created about 30 years ago, all of the buildings on the block between McCamly Street and Capital Avenue were considered contributing structures, even though many were new buildings, Hilton said.

Contributing buildings benefit from a 25 percent income tax credit that can be taken over a number of years and used to improve the building, she said.

Any owner of a building in a historic district must submit a request for approval of changes to the exterior, including demolition, Bedsole said.

"So that there is some oversight of what changes may occur within that district and their potential for historic value," Bedsole said. "But just because it sits within the district doesn't mean that it has historic value."

Tearing down 50 W. Michigan Ave. would not threaten the district's historic designation, Bedsole said.

"The district will always continue to exist," she said. "It doesn't make the district go away if there are changes."

If approved for demolition, BCU would move forward with the project within the next 90 to 120 days, Dehn said.

But if the Historic District Commission decides the building is necessary to maintain the integrity of the downtown, Dehn said BCU might pursue other legal options. He declined to speculate what those might be.