

## Commission OKs razing building

### HDC votes 4-3 to demolish structure

Elizabeth Willis • *The Enquirer* • November 9, 2010

A downtown Battle Creek building will be torn down after the Historic District Commission narrowly approved its demolition.

Commissioners split 4-3 over the decision to allow Battle Creek Unlimited to raze 50 W. Michigan Ave., a vacant building it has owned since December 2008.

Nearly an hour of public comments were evenly divided among those who supported the decision to destroy the building and make way for new construction or an events plaza, and those who believed its presence added value to the city's historic central business district.

The two-story retail outlet had been home to J.C. Penney and Cereal City Office Supply before it fell into disrepair.

Karl Dehn, BCU president and chief executive officer, said it would cost \$2.2 million to renovate the building. Efforts to market it to prospective developers in the four years it had been vacant had failed.

"We believe it will continue to negatively impact the community in many ways, including reducing property values and creating disinvestment by nearby property owners," Dehn said.

Because the 51-year-old brick building is within a historic district, BCU must seek commission approval to alter its exterior or demolish the building.

Dehn told commissioners the plan is to knock down everything except the side walls in order to protect neighboring buildings. Murals could be painted on the remaining walls until a profitable use for the space can be determined.

Some who were opposed to razing the structure believed it was a strong building that could be renovated for less cost than it could be built new.

"If you don't like the skin, you can change the skin.

The bones are steel," said Larry Rizer, a Battle Creek architect. "There's great potential for that building."

Others said BCU should turn the building into a history museum. Some were generally opposed to razing buildings to make space for new development.

"We would welcome a museum in the downtown if it was sustainable," Dehn said in response. "But it also requires a willing investor."

Bill Schroer, who owns a 133-year-old building downtown at 2 W. Michigan Ave., said the Downtown Partnership, which he chairs, supports the proposed demolition.

St. Philip Catholic Central High School Principal Kathy Grosso also voiced her support.

She said the \$2.2 million estimated renovation cost would likely become \$3.2 million by the time the project is complete.

"And I'd rather have that money be spent in attracting and keeping our young people in town," she said.

Historic District Commissioner Glen Harris Jr. said he felt the cost of renovation was minimal and that the building could have been marketed better.

"I think the matter is how to attract more businesses to downtown first of all before we start making holes in our downtown," he said.

Chairman Kurt Thornton said as a historian he thought the building contributed to the tapestry of downtown.

"I'm not really in favor of it being torn down," he said. "I don't have the money to renovate the building. I don't have the money to invest in it and I know BCU has tried to find someone to do this."

During a vote by show of hands, Thornton, Dan Buscher, Doug Sofia and Michael Troutman voted to allow demolition. Harris, Heather Lane-Fowler and Janeth Hatch voted against it.

Dehn said BCU will proceed with plans to raze the building though no time frame has been set.

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