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Plan for new park would displace store

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The city of Battle Creek is laying the groundwork for a plan to replace four downtown buildings with green space.

As part of a major revitalization effort for the central business district, the city is looking at demolishing the mostly vacant structures on the northeast corner of Michigan Avenue and McCamly Street.

A new park there would replace Festival Market Place at the corner of McCamly and Jackson streets, which is set to become a new office tower for Kellogg Co.

The city notified impacted property owners last week it was interested in purchasing the lots, City Manager Ken Tsuchiyama said.

The city will try to avoid using eminent domain to secure ownership of the land, Tsuchiyama said.

"It's not intended to be one of those things where we force them out," he said. "We're trying to make this as amicable as possible."

The one business possibly affected by the project is Rice's Shoes. The shop has occupied a storefront at 62 W. Michigan Ave. since 1988, and has operated downtown for 61 years.

"It's still kind of a shock," said Corey Williams, who purchased the business in 2001.

Williams recently moved his BC Flower Shop from Columbia Avenue to the rear of Rice's Shoes. The flower shop opened at the new location on Monday.

"We won't close," he said, adding that he plans to keep the two businesses together. He's just not sure where they could relocate.

The two stores employ 10 people, Williams said, and he's open to moving them to any space in the Battle Creek area with 5,000 square feet and ample parking.

"We really would prefer to stay downtown, because of our customers," Williams said, "They don't like the traffic of the mall area."

Customers in Rice's on Wednesday said they would continue to shop there if the store relocated because of the selection of custom, orthopedic shoes.

"I'd follow them," said Ted Peck, 55, of Urbandale. "I've even brought my ex-wife here to get her shoes done."

One of the goals of the \$85 million revitalization project is to make downtown Battle Creek more pedestrian-friendly and attractive to businesses.

While the new park would force one business to relocate, Tsuchiyama said the overall impact on downtown will be positive.

"The bigger picture is we're trying to create an environment where businesses want to locate," he said. "This is one of those situations where most of those buildings are vacant. Some have not been used in months, some in years."

No timeline for the demolition is set, he said, and the city still must appraise the properties and work with their owners on sales terms.

The total cost of purchasing and demolishing the buildings won't be clear until the appraisals are complete and the city has gotten a better look at each building, Tsuchiyama said.

He said demolition work could begin by early next year.

Tsuchiyama said he hoped Williams would choose to keep his business downtown.

"We certainly want to talk to them about how that will occur," he said.

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