

## Grass Roots: Neighbors, artists want resolution on Garver Mill site

PAT SCHNEIDER | The Capital Times | pschneider@madison.com | Posted: Friday, July 15, 2011 6:30 am

Got a clever idea on how to get a white elephant to sing for its supper? Mark McFadden would love to hear it.

McFadden lives in the east-side Madison neighborhood where the former Garver Feed Mill building is crumbling, and he also served on a task force that envisioned an arts incubator in the century-old building tucked behind east side Olbrich Gardens. Lovingly restored and dramatically renovated, the old industrial space would be reborn as a place for artists to create and the public to experience and purchase art.

That dream was dashed on the stalled economy in May, when the nonprofit Common Wealth Development Corporation pulled out, reporting that after more than two years of trying, it just couldn't raise the \$15 million needed for the project.

"The neighborhood would like to have something clever happen there," says McFadden of the decaying landmark that poses ever greater hazards to taggers and others who sneak in to the isolated property. "If that building comes down, a real legacy of the east side will be lost, and we don't have a lot of them left."

Neighbors are not the only ones who want to satisfy the aspirations aroused by Common Wealth's grand proposal. Appetite whetted by the prospects of the incubator, the arts community is beginning to clamor for affordable spaces where artists can connect with the public.

Members of the Schenk-Atwood-Starkweather-Yahara Neighborhood Association are preparing to formally ask city officials to give them a voice in what happens at the Garver site, McFadden says. He also anticipates that residents will press Mayor Paul Soglin to pencil in money for stabilizing the building next year at public budget sessions scheduled to start at the end of this month.

"As time goes on, the opportunity for stabilizing the building dwindles," McFadden says. "We as a community have to decide whether to invest in this property."

And there's no better time than the present to do that, says Bill Barker, a park commissioner who headed up the panel that decided an arts incubator was the best next use for the former feed mill. "It's way too premature to just throw in the towel," he says.

Barker envisions a corridor connecting existing and developing parks with the economic generators they will attract sweeping through the isthmus from Olbrich Park on the east side to the Olin-Turville Conservancy in the south-central part of the city.

"The city must invest in infrastructure to preserve the quality of life that is such an important thing for this city. What else is going to keep the creative classes here?" he asks. "Imagine if we get the infrastructure right; what a gold mine it will be when things pick up."

Some observers figure Soglin must have had something in mind for the Garver property when he called the question and asked Common Wealth whether their project was a go, but if the mayor has ideas about what he'd like to see happen there, he's not saying.

Before discussing the future of the site, the city needs to know what it will cost to make the building and grounds safe, says Soglin, who directed city engineers to deliver estimates on stabilizing the building and cleaning contaminants from the site by sometime during September.

No one doubts those costs will be high.



Common Wealth projected it would take about \$1.2 million to stabilize the building back in September 2007, and four intervening winters of snow and ice have caved in more of the roof and eroded more of the brick walls.

As for pollution, a 2009 environmental impact study found asbestos, lead paint, petroleum products and other contaminants on the site. Common Wealth sought \$520,000 in state funds for partial clean-up, to be matched with \$280,000 in other funds.

How would the cash-strapped city cover the expenses, whatever they are? "I don't know," says the mayor in an interview, adding that no city tax revenue is available for the project. "The future of the building is bleak."

But razing the building also would carry a high price tag -- likely in the hundreds of thousands of dollars -- and would involve cleaning contaminants from the site.

Don't look for help from the Olbrich Botanical Society, caution members of the nonprofit group that administers the nearby gardens and deeded the Garver site to the city. The group is facing its own economic challenges in the recession, members say.

Meanwhile, frustrated demand for arts spaces bubbled up as an issue last month when artwork created at the Boombox the Wasteland festival staged at Union Corners (site of another redevelopment pursuit foiled by the economy) materialized in a guerilla exhibit on the Garver property.

The art was promptly removed by city parks division workers because of concern that the exhibit would attract people to a dangerous space, says Boombox organizer Wendy Schneider. But the thwarted desire for art incubator space -- and getting help from the city in creating it -- persists.

"If they want to leave Garver a wasteland, they'll do that," says Schneider. "But if an incubator doesn't happen there, where will it happen? How can we artists be involved in the process?"

Schneider, a music producer and filmmaker, is among those in the arts community saying that a less elaborate and less expensive incubator space than envisioned by Common Wealth would fulfill their needs. She is illustrating that with "gypsy exhibits" of the Wasteland art, which was installed in the yard of the EVP Coffee on East Washington Avenue last month, and will open in the parking lot of the Weary Traveler restaurant on reconstruction-wracked Williamson Street later this month

When artists can't find affordable space to create and show their work in Madison, they leave for places like Milwaukee that have a wealth of repurposed industrial spaces, says Karin Wolf, arts program administrator for Madison.

The city does appreciate the benefits of having a vibrant arts community, she says, naming economic development, neighborhood stabilization and drawing other creative workers to the city as examples.

The city's role in attracting and retaining artists revolves around functions like linking up the right developer and the right space, she says. That's similar to what city officials, led by former Mayor Dave Cieslewicz, tried to do at Garver in what became the Common Wealth project.

Artists now are wondering who can take the lead to make an arts incubator in Madison a reality. Neighbors are wondering where the leadership will come from to make something happen at Garver.

"It's going to have to come from the mayor," says Lou Host-Jablonski, head of the Schenk-Atwood-Starkweather-Yahara Neighborhood Association. "Let's not throw it all away. Let's figure out a way."