



03/19/2005

Officials agree on price for mall sale

By STEVE COLLINS , The Bristol Press

BRISTOL -- Seizing a chance to take what they called a crucial first step to revitalize downtown, city leaders Friday agreed to buy the Bristol Centre Mall property for \$5.3 million.

"This is the future of Bristol at stake tonight in this room," Mayor Gerard Couture said shortly before city councilors and the Board of Finance endorsed the deal.

When lawyers sign the papers transferring ownership of the 17-acre site Monday, the city will immediately become the landlord for about 35 tenants who will have as long as a year to move out before the city knocks down the decrepit mall.

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Officials said they will immediately terminate an agreement between Walgreens and the current owner, S. Rudy Gatto and Associates Development Corp. of Southbury, to construct a new store on the corner of Riverside Avenue and North Main Street.

The property the city is buying includes the mall, grocery store and paint store. It doesn't include the McDonalds restaurant. However, the restaurant owners told city officials they're willing to relocate within the property.

The city plans to build a \$61 municipal complex on a portion of the site that would include a recreation and community center, a new Bristol Boys and Girls Club, a performing arts theater and a parking garage. The state is expected to chip in \$45 million to cover the bulk of the costs.

The remaining half of the property would be sold to developers willing to erect upscale shops, offices or housing, officials said.

The most serious questions raised about the deal focused on possible environmental problems on the property, a concern that pushed Dolores Capers, a finance commissioner, to cast the only vote against the purchase.

Though Jonathan Rosenthal, the city's economic development director, said the only contamination discovered so far comes from asbestos in the building and some old coal and fuel spills in parts of the soil -- which together would cost less than \$1 million to clean up -- Capers said she's worried about the potential for bigger problems.

But Couture said that officials need to put aside their fear and embrace the opportunity to pump life back into a downtown that has struggled for nearly half a century.

Doing something to restore the city center has "been in the hearts and souls" of Bristol residents for years, he said, and this is the moment to pull it off.

The mall, which opened in 1969, has never been the success the city hoped for. From the start, it had empty stores and struggled to attract shoppers. By the early 1990s, it had faded badly, unable even to fill one of its two anchors.

Tim Gamache, a resident, called for the city to take action. He said he was tired of the ghost town that downtown has become.

Only one person spoke clearly against the proposal.

"I'm against this whole fiasco," said Dan Cassina. "I think you're wasting taxpayers' money."

Former Mayor Frank Nicastro urged officials to wait for the results of a number of studies underway on the proposed downtown plan. "Make sure we're not going to end up paying dearly in the end," he said.

But several officials said that the price tag would only have risen as the Walgreens project moved forward. It was cheaper for taxpayers and better for downtown to make the deal now, they said.

Attorney **Houston Putnam Lowry** of Meriden, hired by the city to negotiate the terms with Gatto, said the mall's tenants paid \$480,000 in rent last year. The owners shelled out \$500,000 to operate the mall, he said.

"Historically, it's been a break-even venture," he said.

But Walgreens would have made it profitable for Gatto, officials said, even if the mall continued to fall apart behind it.

Lowry said that during negotiations with Gatto's lawyers he "thrashed them about the head and shoulders" on possible contamination issues and they did the same with the value of Walgreens to the site.

The city had hoped to pay as little as \$4.5 million for the mall property, but Gatto sought considerably more. In the end, **Lowry** said, both sides shook hands on a price tag of \$5.229 million. Taxpayers will likely have to chip in another \$100,000 or so in closing costs.

Comptroller Glenn Klocko said the mall will be added to the city's insurance policy on Monday. The city is also hiring Gatto to manage the mall for \$5,000 a month.

The council voted unanimously to buy the mall, but Councilor Ron Burns abstained because he works for the Boys and Girls Club. Councilor Al Myers was absent.

Couture said he was gratified by the support he secured from both the finance board and council.

"We have control of our destiny," the mayor said.

He said there are "going to be hills and valleys" ahead but the city has taken a daring step into a future that could, with luck and wisdom, reverse decades of decay.



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