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City to apply for support for Bleecker Street projects

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UTICA — New life is coming fast to a Bleecker Street block that once faced demolition, as a host of developers seek to open the various businesses they have planned there.

And the projects may receive a boost from the Main Street grant program offered by the state Division of Housing and Community Renewal. The city's Common Council unanimously passed a resolution Wednesday authorizing the city to proceed with the grant application.

City Urban and Economic Development Commissioner Robert Sullivan said the city would ask for anywhere from \$500,000 to \$1 million for projects underway on Bleecker Street, as well as several proposed projects. The grants are awarded for building façade work and other improvements such as street lights and sidewalks.

The existing projects include:

- * 237-239 Bleecker St.: Wade McCrite is redeveloping the former Meyda Tiffany building into retail space on the first floor, possibly for an antiques shop, and apartments upstairs.
- * 243-245 Bleecker St.: George Heath, who has redeveloped at least one local house with McCrite, is looking to open a bar or restaurant
- * 249 Bleecker St.: Latic Sulejman, a Bosnian martial arts instructor, already has opened a karate studio in the back of the building and says he will have a store with martial arts equipment facing Bleecker Street open by the end of the month.
- * 251-255 Bleecker St.: The building will serve as the Utica base for Bonacci Architects, while the upper floors will be two apartments.

David Bonacci, chairman of the city's Scenic and Historic Preservation Commission and a Landmark Society board member, will live with his wife in one of those apartments, and they will rent out the other.

"This is really an example of being able to save the existing stock of buildings in the city of Utica and turn them into adaptive reuses," he said. "I think, in the long-run, this type of redevelopment is more cost-efficient than building a new building, and it's a green approach because you don't have to tear one down that already exists."

Other projects that could occur if the grant comes through include a college bookstore with a coffee shop and a student housing complex. Sullivan, however, wouldn't divulge names of potential developers because there are no formal deals yet.

"They're waiting to see what happens with the grants," he said.

Sullivan said the momentum on Bleecker Street can be traced in part to the coming construction of the Utica Multi-Modal Center on Charlotte Street, which will include a parking garage with 270 parking spaces.

Councilwoman Lorraine Arcuri, D-at large, said the block can use a "shot in the arm."

"I think any improvements down on Bleecker would be a good thing," she said.

The move wasn't without some controversy, however, as Councilman Frank Vescera, whose 1st Ward district includes most of downtown, questioned approving a grant for which the council had seen no paperwork.

"I would like to see these grants or the generation of these grants in writing," he said.

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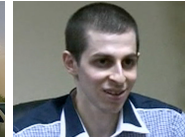
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