



Council asks for state funds for Bleecker St.

By **BRYON ACKERMAN**

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UTICA — The city Common Council voted Wednesday to apply for up to \$500,000 in state funding for improvements to the Bleecker Street historic district.

Utica officials are asking for the state Division of Housing and Community Renewal Main Street grant to fund façade upgrades, building renovations and streetscape enhancements.

City Urban and Economic Development Commissioner Robert Sullivan said the state was looking for an area with many vacant, underutilized buildings in a downtown, commercial district. Several buildings on Bleecker Street are empty, historic, privately owned and on the tax rolls, he said.

“That’s like exactly what they’re looking for,” he said.

Common Council members in attendance for Wednesday’s special meeting voted 5-1 in favor of submitting the grant application, which is due to the state today.

The council approved a version of the application in March, but the updated version added the word “affordable” to the part about funding for housing, and this concerned some council members.

Councilman Bill Phillips, D-5, said he was voting in favor of applying because of the benefits the grant could provide overall, but he was displeased the council first received the application a few days before last week’s meeting and that the grant was directed at low-to-moderate-income housing.

“I don’t think that’s the way we want to go with our downtown,” he said.

Councilman Frank Vescera, D-1, said he voted against applying because he didn’t think the city was transparent enough during the process.

Telling everyone that Bleecker Street would have loft apartments in the future, but then changing the plans last minute to low-income housing sends a bad sign about the stability of the city’s plans, Vescera said.

“That does not bode well for bringing businesses into the area,” he said.

Sullivan said the building improvements with housing for workers, artists and students will be the start of what could attract people to the district for higher-income housing.

Mayor David Roefaro said the most important thing is that the grant will strengthen the look and viability of downtown Utica.

“We can’t afford to let these grants go by the wayside,” he said.

Evolving projects

Utica School of Commerce President Philip Williams said he is happy for any funding that can improve property values in the area, which is home to the school.

Williams said Bleecker Street upgrades will work well alongside other projects such as the development of a parking garage, but all the projects need time to evolve.

Developers George Heath and Wade McCrite about a month ago purchased the former Meyda Tiffany building at 237-239 Bleecker St. and the former Millennium Nightclub building at 243-245 Bleecker St. for \$5,000 each, they said Wednesday.

Heath said they would look into applying for the façade improvements, but they wouldn’t go for the housing funding because they

plan to develop lofts for themselves on the third floor of each building.

The grants would be helpful because they expect to spend at least \$150,000 on developing each building – one into a restaurant and one into a nightclub, Heath said. They already spent about \$15,000 for a new roof on one of the buildings and to remove 27 tons of debris from the two buildings, he said.

“You’re only going to get out of these buildings what you put into these buildings,” he said. “These buildings were built to stay.”

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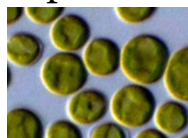


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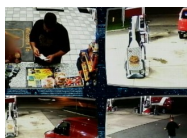
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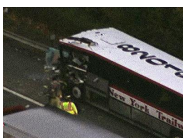
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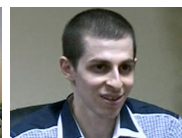
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