



Oneonta to buy ex-Bresee's complex

By Jake Palmateer

Staff Writer

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ONEONTA _ The city of Oneonta will pay a nonprofit medical group \$150,000 for the dilapidated former Bresee's building under an agreement reached Tuesday.

The deal with National Emergency Medicine Association is dependent on a successful closing with the building's owner, Maurice Ramos, who is donating the defunct department store to the group, Mayor John Nader said Wednesday.

That transaction should be final "within a few days," Nader said.

The city would then transfer the title to Otsego County Development Corporation, which would be more effective than the city in marketing the building to potential developers, Nader said.

The deal with NEMA, which had intended on holding the building and finding its own buyer, ensures the city will have more control over the future of the building, Nader said.

A series of four motions enabling the transaction were unanimously passed by the seven aldermen present at a special meeting of the Common Council on Tuesday. Seventh Ward Alderman Sean Farrell was absent.

The meeting was originally announced as a second public hearing for a Restore New York grant application the city is making for about \$1 million in state funds to fix the building.

The addition of the motions to the agenda was not released to the media or the public before the 7 p.m. meeting.

Nader said the deal was reached late in the day Tuesday, and the motions were not drafted until 6:30 p.m.

An initial Restore New York public hearing was held Sept. 18. No one from the public participated.

At that hearing, city Engineering Administrator Joseph Bernier said the city may end up assuming some of the tax burden on the property.

Ramos owes \$32,230 in back county, city and school taxes, as well as tax penalties and fees, according to the county treasurer's office.

Annual school taxes will also be levied on the properties this fall.

"We're going to have to work out an arrangement to satisfy that tax obligation," Nader said.

The former Bresee's buildings at 155-161 Main St., 163-165 Main St. and 1 Dietz St., as well as an adjoining lot on Wall Street, were at one time on the market for \$1.1 million.

Ramos bought the Main Street buildings and the parking lot in January 2004 for \$225,000, according to the city assessor's office.

Earlier this month, it was announced Ramos was donating the buildings to NEMA to avoid paying for repairs after the city declared the complex unsafe. Ramos can write off the donation on his taxes as a charitable contribution and avoid back taxes on the property.

OCDC is the oldest nonprofit economic development corporation in the county and has traditionally handled a low-interest loan program geared for agriculture and high-technology businesses.

This is the organization's first foray into property holding, said OCDC Executive Manager Carolyn Lewis. It agreed last week to enter into the deal.

OCDC is not paying the city for the building, she said.

"There is no exchange of money from OCDC to the city," Lewis said.

Although the building is currently on the tax roll, OCDC will seek to have it taken off while it holds the title, she added.

Lewis, who is also Otsego County economic development director, said it has not been determined how the proceeds of the sale of a renovated Bresee's building would be distributed.

Nader said the money used to purchase the vacant building will come from the city's fund balance, but if the city receives the competitive Restore New York grant, it would reimburse itself for the \$150,000 used to obtain the building.

The grant application indicates the funding will be used for partial demolition, facade restoration and other repairs, including the roof.

"We're not going to wait for a potential developer. We're going to use the Restore (New York) money to restore the building," Lewis said.

This, she said, will enhance the property and make it more marketable.

Nader said the city needs to ensure the property ends up in good hands.

"It is much easier for a development corporation to make and dispose of property, say, to a good private developer," Nader said.

The former retail hub was deemed unsafe by the city earlier this year after Ramos was asked several times to correct deficiencies.

The condition of the structure, which is connected to other downtown buildings, has caused concern about fires and other safety hazards among city officials and neighboring business.

Earlier this spring, the city made plans to secure the building from trespassers and vandalism, have an engineering study performed and fix a leaking roof that city Code Enforcement Officer Peter Friedman said could lead to a disaster downtown.

"We are immensely concerned about the roof," Nader said.

Wilber Bank President Douglas Gulotty is president of OCDC. Vice president is Rob Robinson, who is also president and chief executive officer of the Otsego County Chamber and chairman of the city Planning Commission.

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