

Bethlehem planners declare old brewery, auto parts store blighted



PHOTO GALLERY: The old Uhl's Brewery in Bethlehem is the only brewery built before Prohibition that's still standing. (Emily Paine)



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BETHLEHEM — The Bethlehem Planning Commission on Thursday declared the former Uhl's Brewery and a shuttered auto parts store property blighted, a designation that could eventually land the buildings under control of a city agency.

Planners determined the owner had had more than enough notice and time to repair the code violations but the violations have persisted for years on both vacant properties.

The city declared the former brewery, more recently known as Miller Wholesale at 810 Monocacy St., unsafe in 2004 and condemned it five years later after no action was taken to repair rotted soffits, crumbling brick and uncovered windows.

The property that housed the auto parts store, 16 W. Goepp St., started receiving violation letters in 2009 and was condemned later that year after city cited rust and other conditions in the interior of the building.

City officials say the owner has not since applied for permits to correct any of the code violations.

The properties are owned by companies of Giel Millner of Virginia.

Rob Melosky, chairman of the Planning Commission, said the owner would be here if he thought there was a "strong sense of urgency" to get the repairs done so he could market it to a potential developer.

"I just think the timeline doesn't add up," Melosky said.

The owner has 30 days to begin making repairs or appeal the ruling before the properties are declared blighted. The designation is the first step in a long process whereby run-down properties could ultimately come under control of the Redevelopment Authority. Acquiring a property through eminent domain would require the authority to pay fair market value for the property.

Kevin Fogerty, an Allentown attorney representing the owner before the Planning Commission, said the owner would likely do some repair work and appeal both rulings.

He said the Goepp Street property is not a safety hazard to the public, and all city concerns are in the interior of the building. He said some of the conditions were raised during a landlord-tenant court dispute his client won. He offered city officials to tour the building.

Fogerty added after the meeting that the other property had been poised to be sold for the development of some loft apartments, but that agreement of sale fell through earlier this year over an legal dispute involving parking with a neighboring business, Old Brewery Tavern. That dispute is still wending its way through court.

The city has identified the former brewery as a possible "historic resource," saying it would likely be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places if the proper documentation is gathered.

Ed Healy, assistant city solicitor, told Fogerty the owner is now well positioned to make the improvements to the Goepp Street property. Earlier this week, City Council approved a new Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance district that gives owners tax breaks on improvements to new construction in that neighborhood.