

City launches last-ditch effort to save historic bank building By Megen Wessel, Times Staff Writer Monday, September 09, 2002

Last week, the members learned that Westminster Union Bank is planning to demolish an old building on East Main Street that was built in the late 1890s, and they are now trying to find a way to talk with representatives from the bank.

"We're concerned that we're going to lose another building with a tie to the historic fabric that makes up the downtown," said commission member Laurie Walters. "There are so many options to off-set the cost of renovating historic buildings like this one. We just want a chance to stop the wheels a little bit to sit down and look at all the options with the bank."

The bank owns the building and obtained the demolition permit in July after deciding that renovating the building wouldn't be cost effective, said Mark Pohlhaus, president of Westminster Union Bank last week.

"I think we should use this as an opportunity and a lesson even if we lose this time," said Kristen Stevens, two-year member of the Historic District Commission. "We've got to have a fighting chance to make a pitch to save what we've got."

And the City Council agreed with the members during its meeting Monday evening.

"I think we need to look at how the process can be fine-tuned so that the Historic District Commission can have the opportunity not to act as an obstruction, but I think a lot of residents would like to know that there are alternatives out there and that there is help to getting to them," said Councilman Thomas Ferguson. "At least give the commission -a body that we put together - at least the chance to give a pitch to save these structures."

No formal decisions were made by the council Monday evening, but members of the commission hope to meet with members of the bank before the building is razed sometime this week.

n In other business, the City Council awarded a \$2.8 million bid to Kinsley Construction for the construction of a three-story parking deck and renovations to Locust Lane.

The project will be done in seven phases, said Thomas B. Beyard, director of planning and public works.

No official timetable was available Monday evening, but the public will be notified of parking changes around the Longwell lot, Beyard said.

n The city will also be hosting visitors from its sister city in Estonia during Fall fest.

Both the mayor and council chairman of Paide, Estonia, will arrive in Westminster on Sept. 21 and spend several days touring area businesses, such as Lehigh Portland Cement, Marada Industries, Kohn Design and Printing Company, Carroll Lutheran Village and Human Services Programs of Carroll County, and eating in downtown restaurants, Beyard said.

For several years, Westminster has looked into creating a partner city relationship with a city in Estonia, and officials have found a match in one of the Baltic country's oldest municipalities - Paide.

The partner city concept was introduced by the Maryland National Guard, which has done work with the Association of Estonian Cities to establish communication and aid relations between local governments in Estonia and Maryland.

Several other Maryland municipalities, including Annapolis, Frostburg and Salisbury, have already paired with different Estonian cities.

In June, two Westminster staff members - Beyard and Ronald Schroers, supervisor of recreation and activities - visited several municipalities to initiate a partner city relationship between Westminster and Paide.

The Maryland National Guard paid for most of that trip and will be paying for this month's visit, Beyard said.

Although the process is in its early stages, some long-term goals of the partnership include developing business opportunities for Estonian businesses to sell products statewide, sponsoring a student from Estonia to study at a local school, and giving government employees a broadened perspective of ways to conduct business.

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