

Austin Redevelopment group prepares to pay \$500,000 for ten Murphy properties

Written by Marty Randall

Friday, 11 December 2015 10:15 -

Though some may consider the move controversial, the Austin Redevelopment Commission (ARC) is ready to move on a deal worth \$500,000.

In return for all of those dollars, the ARC will take ownership of ten pieces of property around the U.S. Highway 31 South and the West Cherry Street areas of Austin. All of the land is currently owned by Tex Murphy of Scottsburg, a well-known figure around the Austin community. Murphy owns perhaps 50 properties in Austin. Mostly residential, the structures are rented out by Murphy.

According to statistics, the City of Austin is reported to have around 60% of its housing described as rental property. The main goal of the ARC is to support and encourage economic development. By purchasing the ten pieces of property from Murphy, ARC members hope to take a large step toward helping the community to grow economically.

The motion to purchase the properties was offered by ARC Vice President Janie Alexander. It was seconded by Chris Fugate, ARC board member and Austin Clerk-Treasurer-Elect. Like the other board members, Fugate is an Austin native. He felt no hesitancy in seconding Alexander's motion to spend \$500,000 at the ARC's specially-called meeting on Friday afternoon, December 4.

“This job includes responsibility to this community. This (purchase) is something we have to do. We've talked about it in the past, and we know there's no reason to wait,” commented Fugate as he offered his second.

In opening the meeting that afternoon, ARC Chairman Richie Buchanan reminded all members – Fugate, Alexander, Councilman Nathan Campbell and Kelly Goodin – that the properties “...have long been on our 'hit list.' We now have the funds available to do this, and it is doable. Now's the time,” he said.

The ten includes:

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- 3 East Main Street, ground on which once stood the community's oldest house. Murphy had the structure torn down several years ago, and it is now a parking lot at the southeast corner of U.S. Highway 31 South and East Main (State Road 256).

- The multi-office structure facing U.S. 31 South commonly known as the Shields Building or Kilburn Building. It is an early example of the more infamous strip mall and has housed professional offices for insurance agents, doctors, lawyers and dentists. A dentist, Dr. Max Middendorf, still practices there part-time. The rest of the building is vacant.

- Several properties behind the Shields Building, including a garage which sits on the smallest piece to be purchased and houses on that section of Cherry St. east of U.S. 31 and on a section of Church Street south of East Main St.

- One house at 93 South High Street and property north of that house.

- Property on the north side of West Cherry St. and east of the house at 93 South High St.

- Houses at 33 West Cherry, 51 West Cherry and 65 West Cherry. All of these structures show the wear and tear they have experienced over the years.

- An additional piece of adjoining property located at the back or south line of the West Cherry St. homes' back yards. It is occupied by a large pile of fill dirt created during the renovation of S.R. 256 West and is reported to contain rebar and chunks of asphalt and concrete as well as soil.

In discussing the purchase with economic development director Bill Sears, the ARC determined that there are two residential renters and Dr. Middendorf. They will be notified of the sale and the need to vacate the buildings. No tenants' rights will be assumed by the ARC.

The vote taken on the purchase was 4-0-1, member Campbell abstaining although voicing his

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strong support for the action.

The sale is expected to be completed within weeks.

“These ten parcels may not be worth \$500,000, but we are in the position to promote for the greater good of this community. Yes, we're going to try to recoup some of that money, but we also want to clean them up and make some nice green space in Austin for the moment. Our first goal is to clean up the properties and tear down the buildings. Then we will address other issues,” stated Buchanan.

Two residents of West Cherry St. were present for the specially-called meeting. Kenny and Barbara Burns were anxious to know exactly what the ARC planned to do and when it planned to do it.

Barbara Burns said she hated to see the ARC spend such a large amount of money on the project. She also wondered why city officials hadn't forced Murphy “...to clean up some of those houses...” Still, the couple seemed pleased that the ARC was taking on the purchase and responsibility of getting the work done.

In other business conducted by the ARC, a contractor had offered a price of \$9,430 to correct a sinkhole on North Dowling Drive. That project was previously approved for ARC funding. North Dowling Drive serves a truck stop.

Members also learned that one of the two new patrol cars being purchased by ARC has been received by the Austin Police Department. The second vehicle will arrive in January.

The ARC will not meet later this month as had previously been planned. A meeting date in January will be announced later.

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