

# Bryan Council OKs property purchase

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The Bryan City Council agreed Tuesday to spend almost \$2 million on downtown property, announcing plans to develop 3.28 acres as retail, residential and office space.

A \$100 million mixed-use development is ultimately anticipated, City Manager David Watkins said, adding that the land could be developed through a partnership with The Lawrence Group, which is based in St. Louis.

The City Council approved contracts on 10 properties between Main Street and Bryan Avenue and along Martin Luther King Jr. Street. The properties include a former Food Town grocery store, a 19,000-square-foot ice house built in 1912, a barber shop, a few vacant lots and Trinity Holy Temple.

Twin City Mission is next to the land purchased by the city, but Bryan officials are negotiating a plan to relocate the agency, Watkins said. About \$3.5 million is budgeted for downtown land purchases in the 2008 fiscal year.

The land purchase announced Tuesday offers the city an opportunity to control future downtown development and spur economic growth, according to city documents.

"We're trying to secure the downtown area so we can have a hand in who does what, where," Councilman Mike Southerland said.

The land purchase is a "big deal," Watkins said this week, explaining that Bryan officials are committed to investing in the downtown area.

"I've never seen a city reach its potential when it ignores a historic downtown," Watkins said. "Downtown Bryan is our heart and soul. It's how people judge a city. You can't have a vibrant community without a heart and without a soul."

Revitalizing the downtown district was established as a goal more than six years ago, when a master plan was developed, said Deputy City Manager Joey Dunn.

"In past phases of the master plan, we put an emphasis on downtown south," Dunn said. "Now we're putting our emphasis on areas north of 23rd Street to MLK. We're calling that our new frontier, but really, it's been in the master plan for years. This is the effort to do what that plan calls for, which is redevelopment and infill on the north end of downtown."

While the effort on the south end of downtown involved "keeping together the original buildings," the north end provides an opportunity for "clearing and rebuilding," Dunn said.

"In order to do that, you've got to assemble land," he said.

City officials said Tuesday their goal is to create a multi-million-dollar mixed-use development that includes residential, retail and office space -- but no specific plans have been agreed upon, Watkins and Dunn said.

"There's interest, but we have not reached agreements with specific developers," Dunn said.

Bryan Business Council president Chris Peterson said it makes good sense to invest in downtown.

"When we can create an atmosphere for development, it's going to pay off in the long run," he said.

"Every dollar we put downtown, there's a huge return on investment. And there is an emotional attachment in our community to the downtown Bryan area. It's the same thing as when the football team is winning. It makes us feel good."

Downtown developer Randall Spradley said he has been working for four years to encourage a public-private partnership to spark construction on the vacant land. Spradley said his company, Astin Partners, isn't planning to develop the property.

"The Lawrence Group is an award-winning high-density, mixed-use urban redeveloper," he said, touting the firm that is in talks with city officials. "This is a good thing. This property assembly is conservative, rational and appropriate."

In other matters Tuesday, the City Council:

? Unanimously denied a request to rezone property on Trophy Drive from office space to a retail district. More than 30 people attended the council meeting to oppose the request. Some expressed concerns about increased traffic at the corner of Trophy and the Earl Rudder Freeway frontage road, while others said the request contradicts what was previously agreed upon with surrounding property owners.

? Awarded a \$3 million contract to Fort Worth-based Mega Contractors Inc. for a new fire station on West Villa Maria Road. Construction is scheduled to begin early next year.

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