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A vision for downtown

Leadership by city could help transform blighted Fontius block

By Don Hunt

June 17, 2006

Congratulations to blogger Ken Schroepel and reporter John Rebchook ("Vacant store stirs angry blog," June 9) for calling attention to one of Denver's great icons to property neglect, the Fontius Building.

My wife and I live in an adjoining block. I have been somewhat timid on the subject for years, not wanting to appear too self-serving. This new focus on Fontius by many others lets me know that this embarrassing building on the 16th Street Mall at Welton Street is a problem not just for a few nearby owners but is an issue that has reached the collective conscience of Denver.

Almost the entire Fontius block, two acres of property in the heart of downtown Denver, is a poster child for urban neglect. This block is at the convention and visitors crossroads in downtown. In the adjacent block is the new \$300 million city-owned Hyatt hotel. One more block away is the city's recent \$300 million expansion of the convention center. One block in another direction is the Denver Pavilions retail center, where the city nurses a \$30 million tax increment investment. No need for a debate about the free market in this part of the downtown. Denver is in up to its waist and needs to pay a little more attention to protecting its mega-investment in real estate and tourism in the downtown core.

What to do? First, this problem will not take care of itself. Several owners on this block are not willing to improve their property, nor are they motivated to sell. Second, let's not let this discussion get mired in the pros and cons of eminent domain. Certainly, eminent domain in this case would not be an abuse of power. This is neither a case of condemning a lake for a Wal-Mart parking lot, nor leveling single-family homes for a waterfront commercial development. Condemnation here would be a last resort to turn around a truly blighted block. But government abuses have reduced the public acceptance of eminent domain for economic development. So let's admit that the condemnation tool is politically off the table.

That pretty much leaves the city to use its power of persuasion and a negotiated market price to acquire the Fontius building, and maybe more of the block. That is the only way that the logjam of owner neglect will be broken, and private market forces will be able to respond. Impossible, you say - that's beyond the capability of the city, where tax collections have been weak for several years.

To illustrate the power of vision and leadership on such an issue, we only have to look back a decade into the Webb administration. The city had the vision to see the potential of new parks along the Platte River, and the concept of Commons Park was born. The needed property was privately held and in industrial use. In only six months, with help from the Downtown Denver Partnership, the city acquired the property without the use of condemnation. Money to pay for the land was found. It happened because leadership made it a priority. The impact of Commons Park in stimulating residential development has been spectacular, and the park will continue to encourage development in the Platte Valley for many more years.

Redevelopment of the Fontius building and block could have the same catalytic effect in the core of the downtown that Commons Park had in the Platte Valley.

An anchor retail store, helping to bolster downtown retail? An exciting new public park and plaza in the center of downtown to welcome our visitors? A retail and residential project that complements the Pavilions and engages our visitors?

With some vision and leadership, 20 years of embarrassment could turn into the next great thing for downtown Denver.

Don Hunt owns and operates The Antero Co., a Denver-based real estate development consulting firm. He was 2002-2003 chairman of the Downtown Denver Partnership.

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The Fontius Building, on the 16th Street Mall at Welton Street, has been vacant for years. The owner has turned down numerous offers to redevelop the property. Don Hunt, owner of Denver-based The Antero Co., calls the entire Fontius block a "poster child for urban neglect."