Demolition planned to accommodate Landis Square project

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VINELAND - Eminent domain, demolition and business relocation are all coming to the city as part of a major downtown project on East Landis Avenue.

While the man behind the eight-years-and-counting Landis Square Redevelopment Project has to wait until summer to close on the biggest financial piece of the puzzle — federal tax credits — the city has stepped in to offer a $750,000 second-generation Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ) loan to help pay for property acquisition and tenant relocation costs associated with the project.

City Council recently approved the loan to the project's visionary Hans Lampart to facilitate movement in the nearly decade-long mission to reshape the eastern gateway of the city's downtown.

“I'm extremely excited to finally be at the goal line,” Lampart told The Daily Journal Thursday at his office. “It's an exciting project for Vineland and myself personally. It's been a hard eight years to get here.”

Economic Department Director Sandy Forosisky said she was glad to see the project moving along, too. "We did the loans to help facilitate and expedite the acquisition of the land," she said. "It's been a long time coming."

The project entails redeveloping an entire block on East Landis from Myrtle Street to East Avenue into a senior citizen housing and retail spot to complement the nearby Landis Theater and Mori’s Restaurant.

Overall, the project will cost more than $19 million.

In November, Lampart finally received a crucial funding element — federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits in the amount of roughly $13.7 million, which he will close on in the summer.
Other sources of funding toward the project come from a roughly $3.4 million Economic Redevelopment Growth grant from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, a prior first-generation $1.5 million UEZ loan from the city, and a deferred developers fee of $830,753.

But as part of the project, properties on the block need to be demolished and their current tenants relocated.

One of them, the Travel Inn, was recently purchased by the city for $1.8 million, which will be transferred over to Lampart for $800,000 after he receives his tax credits in the summer, according to officials.

In the meantime, Lampart will move ahead with the demolition of the building, which he envisions for early March. He's paying for the demo cost.

The next round of demolition will include most of the other properties on the block sometime this spring.

That includes the Adamo Feed Inc. behind the Travel Inn, Crown Fried Chicken, Vineland Glass Co., The Littlest Angel, Dusharm's Pro Foot and a vacant building at 929 E. Landis Ave.

As part of the second-generation UEZ loan, the city will help with the $460,000 cost of the lot owned by Pennente corporation that comprises three of the commercial shops.

In that arrangement, Lampart will contribute $160,000 and the second-generation loan will cover the rest of the acquisition cost, according to the loan resolution.

Relocation costs will run $200,000. Lampart will reimburse the city in the summer, the resolution states.

As for relocation, so far The Littlest Angel and Crown Fried Chicken are interested in staying in the area, Lampart said, and may be included in the new 8,000-square-foot retail space to be constructed on the ground level of the senior apartment building.

But when it comes to the vacant property at the end of the block, the city in a separate ordinance last month exercised its option for eminent domain to claim the lot and eventually turn it over to Lampart.

About $250,000 has been set up in escrow until the city can complete its planned eminent domain process, according to Forosisky.

That eminent domain ordinance, like the loan resolution, was approved in a 4-1 vote, with councilman John Procopio dissenting. “I just feel there’s an amicable way to settle this,” Procopio said of his nay vote. “I think we need to use some empathy and come to some agreement with this individual.”

“I understand John’s empathy,” Council Vice President Paul Spinelli commented soon after. “But it’s quite a big difference between parties in dollar figures. When you look at the assessed value, I think we’re doing the best we can to try to make it work.”

The city offered the owner of the lot $250,000 despite it being assessed at around $150,000, according to officials. But the owner demanded $500,000, Lampart said.

At the end of summer, this all may be in the rearview mirror for the city as the planned construction phase of the project begins.

The coming Landis Square Redevelopment Project envisions sweeping away nearly all existing structures on the East Landis block to accommodate the three-story senior apartment building.
The building will hold 78 apartments, with 68 dedicated for senior citizens and 10 units split among mentally and physically disabled people.

The retail space at the ground level is included in the design. Construction is expected to start in August, according to Lampart.

Eastern Pacific Development is the development firm for Landis Square Senior Apartments, and Lampart is its president. Brookfield Construction will be the general contractor.