

Children's Museum, city see new life for site once eyesore Winona is razed

A long-blighted site on the city's Near Northside could be redeveloped to include a mix of homes and commercial and park space.

The new vision for the soon-to-be-demolished Winona Memorial Hospital is part of a preliminary deal that Children's Museum officials say they have reached with the city.

"The city has agreed to deed it over without a purchase after the demolition . . . but that's pending our reaching a written agreement," Brian Statz, the museum's vice president of operations and general counsel, said Monday.

Marc Lotter, spokesman for Mayor Greg Ballard, confirmed that a deal is being worked out but could not provide details.

"We are actively discussing redevelopment with The Children's Museum and are working through plans to redevelop that area in a way that both supports the museum and the neighborhood," Lotter said.

Statz said the city wants the property to be developed within the next two years. He

said museum officials are considering an interactive sculpture park, but details of that idea still are emerging.

Work will begin Oct. 10 to demolish the hospital, which was abandoned seven years ago and later taken over by the city.

Walking through the dilapidated building is like stepping back in time, with books lying open on desks, pillows stacked in linen closets and surgery dates circled on wall calendars.

"It looks like everyone just got up and left," said city spokesman John Bartholomew.

South Bend-based Heartland Environmental Associates is preparing the property for demolition, including removing asbestos, mold, medical waste and a 20,000-gallon underground fuel tank.

The majority of the waste will be hauled to a landfill, said project manager Nivas Vijay, though the company will recycle what it can. He said medical bills found in boxes

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will be shredded.

Vandals and weather have taken a toll on the building, and thieves have stripped copper from heating/cooling units and other equipment.

"There's probably not an inch of copper left in this building," Vijay said.

The demolition is a last recourse, reached after years of unsuccessful attempts to revive the hospital or sell the property.

The forerunner of the 317-room facility opened at 3232 N. Meridian St. in the 1950s. The hospital closed in 2004 after its operator, Leland Medical Centers of Plano, Texas, went into bankruptcy. Four years later, a court-appointed bankruptcy trustee abandoned the property. The city took control in 2009 after the hospital failed to find a buyer at two delinquent-tax sales.

Museum officials have been eyeing the property since it closed. In 2008, they floated an idea to redevelop it into an interactive learning park but have since broadened the scope.

Revitalizing an abandoned commercial site wouldn't be a first for the museum, which has redeveloped a gas station at 30th and Meridian streets into a park-like space.

Federal money could be available for Winona's redevelopment.

The City-County Council in May approved the use of about \$8 million in Department

of Housing and Urban Development money for several projects, including to demolish Winona, to implode the Keystone Towers -- which took place Aug. 28 -- and to pay for other redevelopment initiatives in the city.

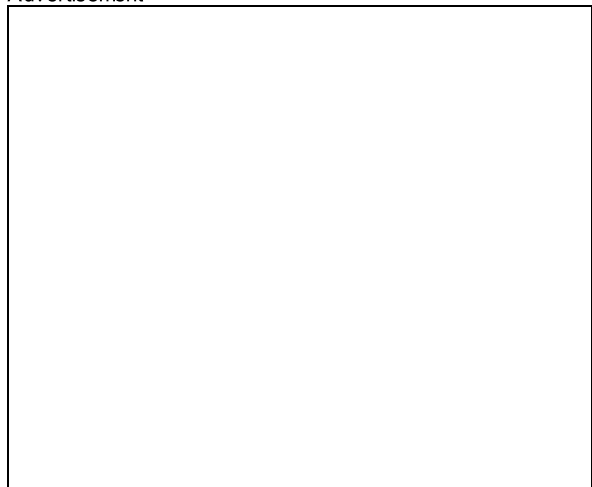
Of that money, \$2 million has been budgeted for Winona. Any funding remaining after the demolition and environmental mitigation can be used for redevelopment.

The bills already are piling up. The city hired Denney Excavating on Thursday for \$695,289 to demolish the 600,000-square-foot, five-story building. It could take several weeks.

The cost of Heartland's work is not yet known, Bartholomew said, but it could be as much as the demolition.

Michael Osborne, president of the Near North Development Corp., said Winona has been a blight on the area and he'll be glad to see it torn down.

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"It's hard to overestimate the impact that simply demolishing the building and remediating the site will have," he said. "And it's got so much opportunity for residential and commercial development -- and maybe some partnership with the museum or other public use -- to serve this area."

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