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LOCAL

Altoona native heads effort to save building

By WILLIAM KIBLER

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Growing up in Altoona, Eric Miller recognized what he believed to be an inconsistency.

Nostalgic people preserved images of the way things used to be, even as they tore down many of the actual things that were still left.

Living in Brooklyn, N.Y., now and the editor and publisher of a Web magazine that promotes city living, Miller has intervened in Altoona's plans to tear down yet another of those actual glories of the past — the Eagles building downtown.

He's written about the impending demolition on newcolonist.com, and he's advertised the derelict structure for sale by auction on the historicproperties.com Web site, hoping for someone to swoop in to buy, stabilize and eventually rehabilitate the building.

The sales pitch speaks of recent development initiatives nearby, including those of Penn State Altoona. But it's probably too late, said city Planning Administrator Lee Slusser, who's listed on the sale site as an investor contact.

The city has already bid the building for demolition to get it down as quickly as

possible. The Codes Department ruled it a hazard after its heavy concrete roof collapsed all the way to the basement. City Council hopes to award a contract Wednesday to raze the structure, according to a report by City Manager Joe Weakland.

Still, saving it isn't out of the question, said Miller, who learned of the demolition plans when his parents alerted him to a recent Mirror article.

Miller likes the look of the place.

"How many other brownstone buildings are in Altoona, especially commercial buildings?" he asked.

Saving it would be a challenge, however.

Merely stabilizing it would require substantial placement of concrete and steel, Slusser said. The trickiest part might be getting the roof out of the shell, Miller said.

A buyer would need to purchase the property from the county.

At least one of three county commissioners is willing.

"[I] would love to see it saved," said Commissioner Donna Gority.

Otherwise, it will likely be a vacant lot for two or three decades, Miller predicted.

Although pessimistic

about Miller's plan, Slusser doesn't regret cooperating.

"You might get 99 ideas in a row that won't work, but the 100th might save the city," he said. "If you don't keep positive for sharing ideas, you won't get that 100th."

Besides, he's learning from Miller's approach.

The city normally markets buildings through the Altoona Blair County Development Corp., which uses a straightforward sell, touting the potential for office space.

The current campaign for the Eagles is a departure.

It aims for a pool of people with the resources, the appreciation of good architecture and the willingness to look anywhere in the country to help them fulfill a dream or transport it to a new location, Miller said.

One such entrepreneur opened a popular bar in Pittsburgh after leaving Chicago, he said.

"Altoona would be wise to target these people and cater to them," he said.

Miller's approach may never get off the ground with the Eagles, but it could help save the next building, Slusser said.

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