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What to do about Fan Fare?

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The Aurora Sentinel

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AURORA | It's a common refrain among customers at Kantamanto African and Caribbean Market on Havana Street: What the heck is that giant building with the bumpy roof?

"They ask me a lot, 'What is this, what is this?'" said Francis Adjei, who owns the market that sits a few hundred yards north of the old Fan Fare building at Havana and East Fourth Avenue.

The dilapidated white building with the bulbous roof and mangled parking lot has been a headache for city officials and area business owners for more than two decades. But city officials say they now have a plan to redevelop not just Fan Fare, but the decaying stretch of Havana that surrounds it.

The Aurora Redevelopment Authority this week presented a report to city council detailing the feasibility of redeveloping Fan Fare and the Havana North corridor, which runs along Havana roughly from East Ellsworth Avenue to East Sixth Avenue. Any plan for the area likely would include dramatic changes, officials said.

In addition to the report, council this week signed off on a plan to conduct a "blight study" of the area that will look at a variety of issues in the area, including environmental issues.

Andrea Amonick, the city's director of development services, said blight studies like the one council approved typically cost about \$20,000 and take around three to four months to complete.

City Councilman Larry Beer, who represents the area around Fan Fare and the north Havana corridor, called the area "troubled" and said it is ripe for redevelopment.

"What do you have urban renewal for if not to deal with an area that looks like this?" Beer said.

To redevelop the area likely means Fan Fare has to be demolished or at least extensively remodeled.

"I think the Fan Fare property will have to be redeveloped eventually. It would have to be a full redevelopment of the 10.5-acre site," he said.

Michael Sheldon, a spokesman for the ownership group, said the owners would like to see the building razed, though that won't be cheap.

"It's really our intention to remove the building — which does have asbestos so it's an expensive job — and redevelop the entire site," he said.

The blight study city council approved this week is expected to look at some possible federal funding for removing asbestos as well as how much the removal would cost. In recent years officials have estimated the asbestos removal would cost more than \$1 million.

To business owners like Adjei who make their living in the shadow of Fan Fare, any redevelopment to the goofy building is welcome news.

Adjei, who has moved his African market from Denver to its current home in Aurora in 2002, said he would like to see Fan Fare razed and replaced with new residential properties like apartments or condominiums.

"Because if I have more residents, I'm going to get more business," Adjei said.

The native of Ghana said if there were more people living near his market, he could expand his inventory to include more than the African and Caribbean products that line his shelves today.

"If we got new apartments here, I could add more American stuff," he said.

Built in 1961, Fan Fare was originally a sprawling indoor discount market. Some documents say the original spelling of the building was "Fan Fair," though city documents in recent years spell it Fan Fare.

After just four years in business — years marked by what was reportedly a massive grand opening and one of the first large-scale shopping centers open on Sundays in metro Denver — the business went under in 1965 and Western Electric moved in, using the building for training purposes.

In the mid-1980s when Western Electric left and since then, the building has been fenced off. Weeds poke up from every crack in the asphalt and the parking lot — which once held up to 1,500 cars — is marked with massive potholes. Some



FAN FARE'S FUTURE? Francis Adjei, owner of Kantamanto African Caribbean Market, talks about Fan Fare on July 10 at store near Fan Fare on Havana Street in Aurora. (Heather A. Longway/ The Aurora Sentinel)



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weeds have even managed to grow out the dips in the of the building's decaying but trademark bulbous roof.

There have been a host of plans in recent years for the Fan Fare building, but nothing has ever come of them.

The owners of the property planned a few years ago to raze the building and build two condominium towers on the property. Early plans for that project called for the buildings to be the two largest in the city.

But the project never came to pass, in part because of the economy.

Another plan for Fan Fare — though the ownership stressed that this was only supposed to be a temporary solution — was to give it a modest face lift and use the massive building as a storage facility.

But like the plan to build towers on the property, the storage facility idea, too, was ill fated because it would cost too much.

According to the city's report, any redevelopment of the area is at least five years away, in part because of the slumping economy.

But Melissa Rogers, development project manager for the city, said Aurora has an opportunity to lay the ground work now for redevelopment when the economy rebounds.

"While there is not a market for redevelopment at this time, we do feel that this presents a prime window of opportunity to better prepare the area for future redevelopment," Rogers told city council this week while presenting the report.

According to the report, any redevelopment would likely be light on retail shops because there is already a new retail area several blocks south at the Gardens on Havana shopping center.

Also, because much of the office space in the area and around the city is already going unused — 30 percent of the city's office space is vacant, higher than anywhere else in the metro area, according to the report — large offices likely wouldn't be a large element of any redevelopment.

But, the report said, the area could attract smaller offices and tenants who can't afford the pricier Lowry development nearby.

As for residential properties, the report said the nearby development at Lowry could be a boon to any Havana development because the newer properties at Lowry are already starting to improve the look of the area. The report cited the East Park section of Lowry, which is currently under construction, and said that because that development is on Lowry's eastern edge and so close to Havana, it could improve the neighborhood as a whole.

"As these final lots and homes continue to be sold, they serve as a positive influence on the quality and condition of existing housing stock located in the neighborhoods between East Park at Lowry and the North Havana corridor," the report said.

Other ideas for the area included in the report were: a center for theater and the arts; a private health and fitness center; a public recreation area; a renewable energy business development site; a job training facility; medical offices; senior housing; medical records storage and golf-related uses.

"Clearly, any of these uses or other potential uses would need to reflect market demand and feasibility of constructing a project given land and building costs," the report said. The report called for feasibility studies by a private firm to determine if any of those plans are feasible.

For the businesses around Fan Fare, it doesn't seem to matter what replaces Fan Fare, as long as the building is replaced with something that can bring shoppers to that stretch of Havana.

Lupe Gomez, manager at Gomez Market across Havana from Fan Fare, said he just wants to look across the street and not see the odd-shaped vacant building.

"It's ugly," he said. "It needs anything that looks better — it can be shops or apartments."

Fan Fare's history in brief

1960: Denver developer Saul Davidson and general contractor Alvin Cohen come up with the idea for Fan Fare Discount City. Later, the two men hire architect William Munchow, who designed buildings in Denver including Currigan Hall, to design the Aurora shopping center.

1961: Crews begin work on Fan Fare in the spring of 1961 and finish work that fall. The shopping center opens in November 1961 to a massive crowd. Business thrives at the discount shopping center for the first few years.

1965: Fan Fare's booming start doesn't last and because of a host of problems, including management woes, the business closes.

1969: Fan Fare sits empty for four years before Western Electric leases it in 1969 and remodels much of the 118,000 square-foot building. The electric company, which also uses the nearby building at 111 Havana St., uses Fan Fare for training purposes.

1984: Western Electric leaves Fan Fare and since then, no businesses have called the odd building home.

1997: Denver investment group Capitol Financial Ventures, LLC., the current owners, purchases the building.

2004: The ownership group announces plans to raze Fan Fare and build two towers on the property. The buildings would be the biggest in the city, the group says, and help revitalize the nearby neighborhood.

2007: The ownership group announces that plans for razing Fan Fare and building towers have been scrapped because of the floundering economy. Officials discuss spending about \$1 million to clear the asbestos from Fan Fare and use the building as a storage facility, but that plan quickly fizzles.

2009: City officials unveil a report detailing the prospects for redeveloping Fan Fare and the nearby stretch of Havana Street. Any redevelopment is at least a few years away, but officials say it would likely include razing Fan Fare.

— *Information obtained from The Aurora Sentinel, Aurora History Museum, Arapahoe County*

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