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Market study could spur NE Log Homes development

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Berkshire Eagle Staff GREAT BARRINGTON — The Selectmen have signed off on an application for a \$50,000 federal grant to pay for a marketing and feasibility study for the old New England Log Homes property. The study is required before the town can seek another \$700,000 for demolition of the Bridge Street building, which has been vacant since the early 1990s and was further gutted by a fire several years ago.

The application was prepared by the Southern Berkshire Community Development Corp., with input from the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, said Tim Geller, CDC director. The property is legally in the hands of a Connecticut bank that foreclosed on the site years ago, but the CDC has been given control over the property while redevelopment efforts are under way.

"At this point, we have \$192,000 committed in federal money for demolition of the existing building and debris piles, but the cost is nearly \$1million," said Geller. "In order to access those \$700,000 in funds, we need a market study that shows a viable reuse for the site."

The demolition job is not of the typical sort: The property's soil has been deemed contaminated from the old manufacturing operation, and special tear-down and removal procedures are required, said Geller.

The CDC must raise money to buy the property before any demolition can take place, and then it must find between \$1.5 million and \$3.5 million for the environmental cleanup at the property. The extent — and cost — of the eventual cleanup will in part be determined by a marketing study," said Geller. Meanwhile, the CDC has a formal option to purchase the property, but he declined to name the price. "Who else would buy it?" said Geller, referring to the environmental issues, "No one wants the liability that goes along with it."

The marketing and feasibility work "will tell us a lot, and it will also act as a trigger for access to future funds," he said. "It's also very timely in relation to the Searles/Bryant school property. The market analysis will definitely have a lot of information for developers interested in Searles/Bryant."

The former Searles/Bryant school on Bridge Street is viewed by town officials as a prime development opportunity. That project has not gone beyond an informal survey of developers, who indicated housing would be the best use of the two old buildings.

The CDC has relied solely on funds from federal and state sources for environmental assessments of the Log Homes property; thus far, some \$350,000 has been spent. The town, since it does not own the site, has not appropriated any funds for the site. Nevertheless, the town must act as the formal grant applicant until the CDC takes ownership. Geller said he expects the grant to be awarded relatively quickly, and the project will be put out to bid.

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