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Demolition of Blight Delayed Again ^[1]

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The Michigan Strategic Fund Board has put off the question of a \$10 million state-level tax credit for the East Lansing Park District redevelopment project from this month's planned meeting to the Board's September meeting. The month-long delay means that demolition of the blighted buildings downtown will also be further delayed.

The developer, DRW/Convexity, had hoped to be on the agenda for the Michigan Strategic Fund (MSF) Board meeting scheduled for next week, August 22. But now the Park District redevelopment project won't be considered by the MSF Board until at least September 26.

DRW/Convexity had hoped to get a decision from the MSF Board earlier this year, but that was delayed by an East Lansing Planning staff member's failure [2] to arrange formal termination of an expired agreement on the properties with a previous owner. The Planning staff member who made this mistake has since changed jobs from East Lansing's Planning Department to the agency that provides staff to the MSF board and City Council has since provided formal notice of termination of that agreement to the prior developer.

It's not clear what's behind the current delay on getting on the MSF Board's agenda, but we reported last month [3] that the prior developer has been trying various legal maneuvers to claim some rights in this matter. That prior developer lost the properties to foreclosure [4] after failing to carry out redevelopment plans for the area.

The current owner/developer, DRW/Convexity, has lately been working with the City of East Lansing and The Peoples Church to prepare for demolition. DRW/Convexity's redevelopment plan was unanimously approved [5] by East Lansing's City Council in June 2017, and The Peoples Church, which is located just west of the project area, has strongly endorsed the current redevelopment project [6].

Below, from left: Peoples Church, the church's Memorial Garden, the vacant smaller commercial buildings, and the vacant "big bank building" to be demolished at the corner of Abbot Road and Grand River Avenue.



So why are the vacant and dilapidated buildings still standing? DRW/Convexity has said the \$10 million state-level tax credit depends on the vacated buildings being standing when the decision is made by the MSF Board. And, the developer says, the project can't happen without that credit. (That's why Council has not forced the developer to demolish the buildings by now.)

The delays make demolition more difficult than it would have been this summer according to

DRW/Convexity's Chris Oakley, because demolition will now be happening when MSU is in session. This timing creates significant issues for the necessary truck traffic and a higher risk of potentially-dangerous mischief by young people who find themselves downtown near the demolition site. MSU home football games necessarily exacerbate the vehicle and foot traffic problems posed by the central-downtown site.

Once the MSF Board makes its decision, demolition can start soon thereafter, because asbestos abatement has already been underway ^[7] at the site in preparation for taking down the buildings, as shown in the photo above taken today. Asbestos abatement of the big bank building at the northwest corner of Abbot Road and Grand River Avenue is expected to be finished by August 31. As for the smaller set of commercial buildings just west of there (just east of Peoples Church), asbestos abatement is expected to be done by September 30.

After the buildings are taken down and the materials removed, trucks will be bringing in loads of sand to fill in the holes in the ground. The area will then be fenced in. According to David Pierson, attorney for the developer, "The contractor estimates 133 trucks going out and 162 trucks coming in with sand to fill the site and stage the demolition. There will be [another] 30 truck trips for equipment." Trucks will be coming and going via Grand River Avenue and Abbot Road.

Pierson recently told The Peoples Church, "Vibration should not be an issue. The contractor understands that this is a sensitive demolition project, and describes the process as slow and methodical. The only vibration will likely be when the concrete wall at the rear is removed and the concrete floor is broken up. They believe the Church is far enough away that any vibration will be slight."

When will the new project be built? Assuming financing comes together—which the developer has said depends in part on the MSF Board approving the \$10 million state-level tax credit—we can expect to see the start of construction in the middle of next year. (According to the development agreement between the City and the developer, the permits are due by May 1, 2018.) To read what the project will look like if built as has been planned, click here ^[6].

Below: The new structure planned for the northwest corner of Abbot Road and Grand River Avenue.



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