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*From the Baltimore Sun*

**Sun follow-up**

## City moves to get 200 properties

### Target parcels surround vacant American Brewery

By Eric Siegel  
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Hoping to set the stage for the future renewal of one of the city's most distressed areas, officials are moving to acquire about 200 abandoned properties around the historic American Brewery building in a long-neglected corner of East Baltimore.

The 30-odd properties closest to the brewery - which has been vacant for more than three decades but is slated to be renovated as the local headquarters of a nonprofit social services agency - will be shored up to prevent further deterioration, while the rest will be held until the city decides what to do with them.

"Over the long term, it gives us the ability to assemble enough property to create redevelopment opportunities," said Michael Bainum, the city's assistant housing commissioner for land resources. "Right now, ownership is so diffuse and the condition of the properties is such that private development is not going to come in in a significant way."

The acquisition plans, which could take as long as a year, represent the city's second major step in recent months to address the decay around the brewery.

This summer, the city applied for a state grant to help acquire and demolish one of the most decayed blocks in the area, saying the demolition would create a cleared site that could attract developers while enhancing the desirability of the brewery and two vacant school buildings nearby.

The area was the subject of a two-part series published earlier this year in *The Sun*, "A Neighborhood Abandoned." The series described life in a community that had lost 60 percent of its population, leaving behind a landscape where about half the properties were vacant buildings and empty lots, and that had been largely bypassed for years by efforts at renewal.

The city says there are no immediate plans about what to do with the properties once they're acquired.

Yesterday, residents on blocks surrounding the city-owned brewery complex - which includes the five-story, 19th-century brewhouse and a vacant former bottling plant - expressed a mixture of satisfaction and skepticism at

the city's intention to begin accumulating abandoned properties on their blocks.

### **'A good idea'**

"It would be a good idea, so people won't be going up in them and starting fires," said Milton Hawkins, who rents a house next door to two boarded-up buildings in the 1600 block of N. [Patterson Park Ave.](#)

A 47-year-old house painter who lives with his fiancée and his two daughters, Hawkins bought a shell last year for \$5,500 five blocks away, which he is renovating for his future home. He said he would be interested in working on some of the properties the city is acquiring as well.

"I would like to buy some myself if the city would let them go," he said. "I would fix them up myself."

Around the corner on the 2200 block of E. Lanvale St. - a street that faces the bottling plant and where two-thirds of the rowhouses are boarded up - Tyrone Berrain echoes Hawkins' assessment.

"I think it's a good idea," said Berrain, 50, a retired city sanitation worker who rents a rowhouse with his wife and four children. "They can renovate them. Even if they don't, tear them down. They're not doing any good standing there."

Down the block, Eva Walker said she has heard talk about plans for the brewery complex and the area in the past but has seen little action. Walker, who has lived in her house since the early 1950s, doubts things are going to be different this time.

"I don't think they're going to do anything anyway," said Walker, 96, a retired schoolteacher.

Two weeks ago, a rental property on the block attracted about half a dozen bidders for an auction, eventually selling for \$24,500. Paul Sobwick, an auctioneer with Auction Brokers who had presided over auctions in the area with few, if any, bidders, said the house "went for a very good price."

"Once you start to see improvement on the street, you're going to see a slow turnaround in people saying, 'I feel comfortable putting my money here,'" he said.

Yesterday, the only visible sign of activity in the area was a work crew putting boards up in the vacant and broken windows of the brewhouse and bottling plant.

Workers had received permission to stabilize the structure pending final agreement to turn the property over to a group led by developer Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse. The group, American Brewery LLC, plans to transform the American Brewery into the Baltimore headquarters of Humanim Inc., a nonprofit that specializes in vocational training and support services for people with disabilities.

Humanim, which will own the American Brewery building once renovations are completed, is marketing federal tax credits to defray the anticipated \$17 million cost of renovations, according to Henry E. Posko Jr., the nonprofit's president and CEO.

The bottling plant, which is expected to cost an additional \$16 million to rehab and is still seeking tenants, will be financed separately, he said.

### **Critical mass**

Posko said he is "encouraged" by the city's plans to acquire properties around the brewery complex.

"To the extent the city recognizes that you want critical mass around the building to support the project, that makes sense to us," he said.

The 200 properties around the brewery that the city is looking to acquire are in addition to the roughly 100

parcels - empty lots and vacant buildings - it already owns.

Of the 200, about 180 have tax liens that exceed the value of the land and/or buildings.

The city already owns the tax certificates, giving it the right to take title to the properties, and has begun ordering research on their ownership, according to Bainum, the assistant city housing commissioner.

"It is our aim to file [legal papers] on at least half the properties by the end of the year," he said.

The other 20 are on blocks around the brewery that are vacant but are not in tax arrears, Bainum said. The city has ordered appraisals for those properties and has set aside \$360,000 to pay for acquisitions and related costs.

If the owners refuse to negotiate a sale with the city, "then we'll pursue eminent domain through abandoned property quick-take authority," Bainum said.

Besides supporting and leveraging the planned investment in the American Brewery complex, Bainum said, the city hopes its acquisitions will help quell speculation in the area.

"We worry about people just buying properties and sitting on them without making an investment in them," he said.

## Unpaid taxes

In addition to the blocks immediately surrounding the brewery, the city plans to acquire tax-delinquent properties on East North Avenue and along a five-block stretch of North Gay Street. The latter acquisitions would pick up where the second phase of the east-side biotech redevelopment north of the Johns Hopkins medical complex ends.

It recalls a late 1980s plan to reinvigorate the area by redeveloping North Gay Street from East Biddle Street to East North Avenue. That plan was eventually abandoned, in large part because at the time no one could be found to renovate the American Brewery - one of a series of plans that did little to stem the deterioration of the area or excluded the blocks around the brewery.

Bainum stressed that the city's acquisition of the properties was an initial step and that much additional work needed to be done.

"At some point, we need to make some hard decisions about whether we try to relocate some folks," he said. "Right now, we're just moving forward on acquiring the vacants."

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