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Entergy donates Mid City building, property to RDA for future mixed-use development

Govt. Street Abandoned Entergy Building.jpg

Entergy donates Government St. building to the Redevelopment Authority, RDA officials announced on Dec. 19, 2013. (Chelsea Brasted, NOLA.com | The Times Picayune)

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Entergy Gulf States Louisiana donated its long abandoned Government Street building to the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority, spearheading a long-standing initiative to renovate the blighted Mid City Warehouse Design District and make it a gateway into Downtown Baton Rouge.

RDA board of commissioners voted unanimously at their Thursday meeting to accept the donation, which had been in the works since 2010, according to RDA President Walter Monsour. The donation, along with the broader redevelopment initiative, aligns with the city-parish's FuturEBR plan.

The building, which Entergy had owned for nearly 80 years, is being donated "to further the RDA's mission and to ensure that this prime piece of real estate becomes the catalyst for development in this area of Baton Rouge," Monsour said.

The 6-acre, 261,360-square-foot parcel, on Government, near Circa 1857, holds 11 buildings and was once home to the city's first electric railway service in the 1800's. An existing rail line borders the western edge of the property. The Baton Rouge Electric Company used the site in the early 1900's, but it has been empty since 2011.

Officials want to develop a mixed-use project on the site, with plans to incorporate its original roots: housing a railway station as part of proposed rail service connecting Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Conversations between the RDA and then-CEO of Entergy Bill Mohl about the property donation began in 2010, said Monsour, and "without equivocation, Bill said yes."

"We're so pleased to partner with the RDA -- an organization with the vision to redevelop properties while maintaining their historical value," said Entergy Director of Customer Service, Sheila Pounders. "It's only fitting that with other revitalization projects going on in the city that this property becomes part of the RDA's portfolio."

The RDA has acquired a total of \$320,000 to help with the initial stages of the redevelopment. Board officials on Thursday approved the organization to access a grant from the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality that would fund up to \$200,000. That money will be used to remediate the property and cover other site work necessary to build the mixed-use project.

Moreover, the RDA has received \$120,000 over the past three years from the Baton Rouge Brownfields program to commission environmental studies and clean-up work necessary to facilitate the donation.

RDA officials will now move to apply for additional funds to pay for the project's development. Monsour said the hope is to capture "disaster recovery funds from the state," including the Environmental Protection Agency and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality.

Also, there could be tax incremental financing attached since the project falls within one of the TIF districts proposed in the FuturEBR plan. Those districts do not currently exist and, depending on how each is structured, will require approval from the Metro Council and, perhaps, the state.

Metro Council member C. Denise Marcelle, whose district include a portion of Mid City, said the donation "represents the elimination of another blighted building in the area; turning blight into something positive."

Though no vote has been taken, Marcelle said her fellow council members will approve whatever financing is necessary to make the project a reality. She added that she would like to see an educational component be part of the overall project, a view echoed by council member Buddy Amoroso. "I'd like to see a children's museum there," he said. "There are so many good things that could happen to help the community."

Marcelle added that since a large population of homeless people congregate in the area behind the parcel, she'd like to see something added to the development to serve the city's homeless population.

The immediate priority is to get bid specifications for remediation work done by mid-February. As for what specifically will be developed on the site, Monsour was noncommittal, saying it was too early. He did add that such large-scale redevelopments tend to become destination projects, requiring, for example, drug stores, grocery stores and laundry facilities. "We want to make sure we put there what needs to go there," he said. "The whole art of redevelopment is to bring back the basic needs of the neighborhood."

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