Persistence pays off

The rehabilitation of a Beech Street landmark is underway. The official groundbreaking for the conversion of the long-vacant Fecera’s warehouse into apartments and an art gallery is 11 a.m. tomorrow, but construction work has already begun.

The beat-up aluminum enclosure over an original loading dock has been removed, a deteriorating roof was taken down to open a courtyard between the main buildings, and two blighted houses were demolished for parking.

All this concerns a massive, historic brick building on a highly visible artery through town. Unlike recent elementary school renovations and a new borough maintenance facility, the $13 million project is not being funded with local tax dollars.

Genesis Housing Corp., a non-profit with a long history of housing rehabilitation in Pottstown, is partnering with Housing Visions to create 43 apartments — mostly one bedroom — in the four-story building with an arts center operated by Art-Fusion19464 on the ground floor.

Using state tax credits requires making the apartments “affordable,” but Montgomery County’s median income is so high that “affordable” by county standards is far from meager by Pottstown standards. Rents will range from $600 to about $900 per month.

Genesis will retain and enhance the historic façade of the building, just as it did with the handsome Jefferson School Apartments at Beech and Warren streets, completed in 2004. The property will have an on-site manager.

It would be nice to say borough fathers rolled out the red carpet for this project, but they did not. Genesis applied to the state three years in a row for the needed tax credits. The first two years, Council declined to provide conditional approval for the project, nor did it provide a letter of endorsement.

Finally, in 2014, Council endorsed the project, and the tax credits were approved last year.

Meanwhile, Council changed the parking requirements, so Genesis then had to obtain a variance from the zoning hearing board to allow the project to move forward. (It was granted).

No other non-profit has done more for the revitalization of Pottstown than Genesis. Over the last 15 years, it has constructed 34 new homes in Pottstown’s most challenged neighborhoods and helped rehabilitate 115 more.

Pottstown residents owe Genesis a debt of gratitude for its persistence.

Commentary by Tom Hylton

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