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Historic homestead future in doubt

By Stephen Mills Staff Writer

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MONTPELIER — The former Jacob Davis farmstead, one of the most historic buildings in the Capital City, has been declared a public safety hazard by the city council.

The classic 1836 Greek Revival house and barn on Route 2 was the former home of Col. Jacob Davis, founder of the state capital, who deeded the land to the city on which the State House is built.

Last week, the City Council held a hearing on the state of the property under the city's public nuisance ordinance after a complaint by adjoining landowner, Fred Connor, of Connor Contracting.

An inspection of the property by City Building Inspector Chris Lumbra and Montpelier Fire Chief/Health Officer Bob Gowans was conducted March 18. It found numerous deficiencies in the building that made it a public safety hazard, according to a report to the council last week.

After a deliberative session, the council unanimously decided the property posed a public hazard and issued a Findings of Fact and Decision on Monday. The council ordered the owners of the property to submit a remediation and abatement plan, to be filed with City Manager William Fraser no later than noon Friday, May 17. The plan will be considered by the council at its May 22 meeting.

The plan requires detailed actions to be taken within five days of approval by the city council to abate any immediate nuisance or hazard to the public. A final abatement or remediation plan must outline specific work to be done, a finance plan to pay for work to be done, and a schedule for completing full mitigation. Failure to do so could result in an order from the council for injunctive relief, penalties, abatement of nuisances and hazards or demolition of the property, and the imposition of liens for exp

The problem for parties involved is the property was the former home of the Two Rivers Center, an agriculture education program run by Food Works. Food Works was dissolved in 2014 by its board of directors following an investigation by the Attorney General's Office concerning the improper management of grants and funds it received for education programs and restoration of the building.

Connor told the council last week that he has first right of refusal to buy the 5 acre property if it is sold.

But according to organizations connected to the property through loans, grants and conservation easements, the ownership of the property is uncertain. According to parties to the property, Food Works was improperly dissolved because it did not dispose of all its assets, including the property and building, leaving ownership in doubt.



Paul Hill, of the Vermont Community Loan Fund, told the council that his organization holds the first mortgage, of \$90,000, on the property, but said VCLF would "be willing to establish our willingness and flexibility to see this property put back into public use."

Hill said it is possible ownership of the building could be transferred to another nonprofit, a sentiment echoed by representatives of other parties to the property.

The Vermont Conservation and Housing Board granted \$57,500 to Food Works and has a conservation easement on the open land and a historic preservation easement on the building. The Preservation Trust of Vermont awarded several small planning grants to Food Works and holds a conservation easement on the façade of the building through VHCB.

In the meantime, Jamie Duggan, vice chairman of the Montpelier Conservation Commission, told the council he hoped to form a nonprofit to save the building.

Food Works was co-founded in 1987 by Joseph Kiefer and Martin Kemple.

Kemple said he would like to see the property transferred to another nonprofit and restored.

Kiefer added: "It's a very sad chapter for me personally, professionally. As far as I'm concerned, it's out of our hands and I don't have much more comment. I don't really want to go anywhere this."

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