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30 HOMES

MUNCIE IS PURSUING
 PERMISSION FROM THE
 STATE TO DEMOLISH
 BLIGHTED BUILDINGS
 IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

By **SETH SLABAUGH**
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HISTORIC DISTRICT DEMOLITIONS

Address	Historic District
206 E. North St.	Gilbert
210 E. North St.	Gilbert
303 E. North St.	Gilbert
306 E. Gilbert St.	Gilbert
322 E. Washington St.	Gilbert
415 N. Madison St.	Gilbert
212 N. Pershing Drive	Emily Kimbrough
222 N. Pershing Drive	Emily Kimbrough
603 E. Jackson St.	Emily Kimbrough
703 E. Jackson St.	Emily Kimbrough
821 E. Jackson St.	Emily Kimbrough
823 E. Jackson St.	Emily Kimbrough
901 E. Adams St.	Emily Kimbrough
907 E. Jackson St.	Emily Kimbrough
115 S. Council St.	Old West End
418 S. Proud St.	Old West End
439 S. Proud St.	Old West End
503 W. Main St.	Old West End
507 W. Main St.	Old West End
511 S. Council St.	Old West End
514 W. Howard St.	Old West End
521 W. Adams St.	Old West End
609 W. Main St.	Old West End
611 W. Main St.	Old West End
615 W. Main St.	Old West End
622 W. Howard St.	Old West End
702 W. Main St.	Old West End
921 W. Charles St.	Old West End
1009 W. Charles St.	Old West End
521 S. Council St.	Old West End
117 N. Jefferson St.	Walnut Street

Source: City of Muncie

MUNCIE — The city of Muncie is seeking state and federal approval to demolish an unprecedented number of homes in historic districts, including some classified as “notable,” “significant” or “out-standing.”

The 30 unsafe and abandoned/foreclosed homes (plus one commercial building) stand in the Old West End, Emily Kimbrough and Gilbert historic districts. All have been declared unsafe.

“If we don’t take them down and nobody is going to adopt them, they would just be demolished by neglect,” said Bill Morgan, the city’s historic preservation officer. “Meanwhile, while we wait for the last stick to fall, most of them are full of vermin, some are drug houses, and virtually all are subject to vandalism and ripe for arson.”

For example, one of the homes, at 212 N. Pershing Drive, built in 1890, recently was destroyed by a fire of undetermined cause.

“These buildings have been in bad shape for a long time, and the cost to rehab them most likely far exceeds their value if they were rehabbed,” Morgan said. “The opportunity to make something good happen in the other direction is very, very slim.”

But because the city is spending U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds to knock the buildings down, it must follow the review process called for in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The review requires federal agencies to take into account the effects that their federally funded activities and programs have on significant historic properties, sites and districts.

The downside to demolition, Morgan said, is that “once they’re gone, they’re gone, and that’s it. Some of these homes are unique for their architecture and what they represent in Muncie’s history. All of them speak to the rapid growth following the Gas Boom. Almost all were built in the mid 1880s to 1910.”



THINKSTOCK

Muncie, Indiana

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DEMOLISH

Continued from 1A

Similar homes "that you thought would never survive" in the historic districts of other cities have been rehabbed and are now worth a lot of money, Morgan said. "That kind of thing can happen, but not if we tear them down. We will have closed the door on that opportunity."

Five of the homes have been classified as "notable," "significant" or "outstanding"—511 S. Council St., 514 W. Howard St., 521 W. Adams St., 322 E. Washington St., and 603 E.

Jackson St.

"The most notable is the J.C. Johnson house on East Washington Street," Morgan said. "The owner has his heart in the right place and would like to restore it. He ended up getting it after the fire in 2007. But we've been dealing with him for two years and there is no credible evidence that he has the wherewithal to do anything about it."

The Johnson mansion sits across the street from the American Red Cross and formerly housed Our Daily Bread restaurant.

A fire burned the top off of the two-and-a-half story

building, which had a slate roof.

The mostly brick house, built in 1897, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It featured stained glass windows, which the previous owner sold, two oriel windows, a two-story stone bay, coffered ceilings, paneled staircase, oak fireplace surrounds, oak pocket doors leading to the library, built-in bookcases, oak wainscoting and oak columns.

A native of New York, J.C. Johnson was a Civil War veteran, lumber company owner, president of a paint and roofing company, a bank president and a city

council member

The house at 521 W. Adams is listed in the National Register of Historic Places nomination as the M.E. Vandercook House, constructed in 1887. It is one of the most elaborate Queen Anne structures in the Old West End. It was later occupied by Alva Kitseiman and then Curtis Rector, who built Rector Apartments across the street in 1929.

The city has awarded demolition contracts for all 30 homes.

But before demolishing the homes, the city must consult with the division of historic preservation

and archaeology at the Indiana Department of Natural Resources as well as the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C.

The majority of the 30 properties proposed for demolition are classified as "contributing" to the historical integrity or architectural qualities that make their historic districts significant.

"If something came along to save any of them, we would do it," Morgan said. "If a developer came along with a proposal in time, we would certainly consider whether it's a good idea."

Ball State graduate students propose to renovate 20th Century Flats

BY SETH SLABAUGH • • DECEMBER 11, 2010



MUNCIE -- Ball State University historic-preservation graduate students were adamant on Thursday about saving 20th Century Flats, a century-old downtown apartment building.

"We don't need any more demolitions," said one of them, Ryan Shrack.

Whitney Airgood added that there already are too many vacant lots and parking lots downtown that used to be occupied by historic buildings.

"We don't want to add to it," she said. "To move Muncie forward, we need to look backward. 20th Century Flats is a great place to start."

The state recently gave the city of Muncie permission to knock down an unprecedented number of homes in historic districts, including some classified as "notable," "significant" or "outstanding."

James Glass, deputy state historic preservation officer, sent the city a letter on Nov. 18 agreeing with the city that it is "appropriate" to demolish 30 unsafe and abandoned/foreclosed homes and one commercial building -- 20th Century Flats -- in the Old West End, Emily Kimbrough, Goldsmith Gilbert and Walnut Street historic districts. Glass is a former head of the historic preservation program at Ball State

The districts are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

20th Century Flats is classified as a "contributing structure" in the Walnut Street Historic District, meaning it adds to the historic quality and character of the neighborhood.

The four-unit apartment building, last occupied as a church, shows that Muncie avoided cramming renters into tenement houses -- rundown apartment houses -- as did bigger cities when the population skyrocketed, the students said.

The timber structure, clad in brick, remains in good condition, said the students of Duncan Campbell, an associate professor of architecture.

They found spacious, well-lit rooms, hardwood flooring, baseboards and trim, solid-wood pocket doors, brick fireplaces, banisters and original light fixtures and windows in the building.

But they also encountered a broken floor beam, a damaged floor beam and evidence of a fire: a hole in the roof, which has exposed the interior to the elements for the past decade. Mold was found in one area.

Student Shelley Greene noted that two other downtown apartment buildings -- Canopic Apartments, built in 1906, and Sanders Flats, built in 1903 -- have been successfully restored in recent years.

The students proposed to renovate 20th Century Flats into seven, one-bedroom apartments at an estimated cost of \$550,000, which they said could be funded by historic tax credits, low-income tax credits, a \$90,000 loan (if a developer can be found), property-tax abatement, assistance from the city through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and other sources.

The building sits next door to an abandoned service station, across Jefferson Street from Jack's Camera Shop, and occupies the same block as Muncie Civic Theatre and Gordy's Fine Art and Framing.

Shrack said it is too costly to throw away finely built structures like 20th Century Flats.

In an interview after the presentation, Gretchen Cheesman, the administrator of the city's unsafe building hearing authority, said, "Anything can be rehabilitated if you have enough money."

Is \$550,000 enough to rehab 20th Century Flats? "That's a very optimistic estimate," she said.

According to Bill Morgan, the city's historic preservation officer, buildings like 20th Century Flats already are being demolished by neglect. Nobody wants them, most are full of vermin, some are drug houses and all are subject to vandalism and ripe for arson.

Contact reporter Seth Slabaugh at 213-5834.

Students urge Muncie to fix up, not tear down historic homes

The city will get \$1.1 million in federal funds to be used to save old buildings.

BY SETH SLABAUGH • SETHS@muncie.gannett.com • DECEMBER 14, 2010

MUNCIE -- Ball State University faculty and students appealed to city officials on Monday to extend their downtown revitalization success into the Old West End and other historic residential neighborhoods.

Bill Morgan, the city's historic preservation officer, announced some news during

a city hall meeting with the historic-preservation faculty and graduate students that could get the ball rolling.



The city will receive a second round of federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) funds in the amount of \$1.1 million. Congress created the program in 2008 to help communities buy, fix up, and resell homes foreclosed and abandoned as a result of the nation's mortgage foreclosure crisis.

Much of the money the city of Muncie received in the first round is being used to demolish about 130 homes. The city can't spend more than 10 percent of the next round of NSP funding on demolition, however.

The city will conduct public hearings before determining how to spend its next round of NSP funds, which the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is requiring the city to spend in a relatively small, targeted area.

"Unfortunately, Muncie has the reputation of being a tear-down city," said student Chris Allen, referring not only to recent demolitions but past razing of buildings over the past half-century, including the old courthouse, the Rivoli Theater and the Delaware Hotel.

Morgan accused the students of "sugarcoating" how much work needs to be done to save old buildings.

The students made a case to save at least three 19th Century, Old West End homes that are among 30 homes in historic districts currently scheduled for demolition. "Building after building is being torn down," said student Brad Carter. "How can we teach history if we can't keep some of it around, if all that's left is a page in a book?"

The students passed around books documenting the national importance of the Vandercook-Kitselman-Rector home at 521 W. Adams St., one of three they urged the city to at least mothball rather than demolish. The other two are a cottage at 115 S. Council St. -- owned by Peter's Rock Foundation in Christ House, which is struggling to preserve the structure -- and a steep, slate-roofed house with original clapboard siding at 622 W. Howard St.

"Is a parking lot better than that structure?" asked student Kyle Boot, referring to 115 S. Council. If the city saved its Ball mansions, why can't it save the home of another industrialist, Alva Kitselman, the students asked. They concluded the home's foundation was structurally sound after learning during a visit that its construction includes steel I beams.

Many of the students complained that Muncie's historic neighborhoods are becoming known for parking lots and vacant lots. If the city is interested, Ball State is "excited about continuing" to offer assistance, said Cynthia Brubaker, instructor of architecture.

"Why fill our landfills more with remnants of housing?" asked student Marissa Bowman, especially when century-old architecture is more interesting than new construction.

During their studies of the three homes, students found some rotten wood, moss, broken downspouts, fire damage, vines and other vegetation taking over walls, broken sidewalks,

asbestos siding, weeds, garbage, and sagging ceilings. But they concluded that all three buildings were structurally sound.

While no one would like to see the buildings saved more than Morgan, the city's historic preservation officer, he accused the students of misrepresenting how much time, energy and money it would take to fix up the three structures. "In every presentation, I heard the words 'cosmetic' and 'easily fixed,'" Morgan said. "It didn't ring true."

The students responded that they didn't find collapsing walls and crumbling foundations, but solidly built and structurally sound buildings.

Morgan previously has said the 30 buildings in historic districts scheduled for demolition are being demolished by neglect. "Meanwhile, while we wait for the last stick to fall, most of them are full of vermin, some are drug houses, and virtually all are subject to vandalism and ripe for arson," he said.

But the students said they encountered only friendly, inquisitive neighbors and some "creepy spiders," not vermin or drug dealers in the three houses they examined, though Brubaker says she did find one syringe. Morgan responded that the students would have encountered squatters and been in danger of falling through the floors had they inspected some of the other homes on the demolition list.

The students also urged the city to save and re-use a mid-century gas station at Jefferson and Washington streets that is being overtaken by vegetation. "It represents an iconic time in American history and should represent part of Muncie's future," student Seth Elder said. "Or you could turn it into yet another empty lot."

Contact reporter Seth Slabaugh at 213-5834.

Police say arson; another abandoned house burns

Officials blame the early Tuesday morning fire on arson.

BY NICK WERNER • NWERNER@MUNCIE.GANNETT.COM • DECEMBER 29, 2010

MUNCIE -- Someone set fire to an abandoned house near downtown early Tuesday morning, according to firefighters.

"It lit up the whole neighborhood," Muncie Fire Department Battalion Chief Jim Clevenger said. The fire was the second arson at an abandoned house in Muncie since Dec. 1. Clevenger, however, told The Star Press that two such fires in a month's time was not uncommon for Muncie in recent years. He estimated that the city has around 24 open arson investigations at abandoned houses from 2010.

"We've got so many vacant buildings across the city," Clevenger said. "It's an issue."

Tuesday's fire broke out around 1 a.m. at 210 E. North St., and was spotted by a passerby who called 911.

Clevenger said he determined the fire started outside the house on the front porch.

The building, a large, two-story structure that once housed three apartments, is surrounded by other vacant homes.

"The point is, there are no witnesses," Clevenger said.

Fires at abandoned homes are especially dangerous to firefighters. Such buildings are often older houses that, like the North Street house, have been split into two or more units, creating confusing floor plans and spaces for firefighters to navigate.



A fire that authorities are calling arson gutted this house at 210 E. North St. Tuesday morning, December 28, 2010. (Kurt Hostetler / The Star Press)

"Even though the homes appear to be vacant, we still have to send guys in to search to make sure we don't have a homeless person sleeping in there," Clevenger said.

Firefighters fought the blaze for about two hours.

Because most of the fire damage was on the exterior of the house, Clevenger said the building was still structurally sound.

An abandoned house in the 1100 block of South Elm Street was destroyed in an arson fire Dec. 1.

Contact news reporter Nick Werner at 213-5832.

LOCAL NEWS

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BATTLING THE FLAMES



FIREFIGHTERS work to extinguish a house fire on Proud Street in Muncie on Monday evening. The house was abandoned.

CHRIS BERGIN / THE STAR PRESS

Delaware County Historical Society wants salvageable sites mothballed

It might be premature to demolish seven of 31 historic buildings, but no one wants them.

BY SETH SLABAUGH • JANUARY 18, 2011

MUNCIE -- The Delaware County Historical Society agrees with the city of Muncie that most of the 31 structures the city plans to demolish in historic districts are too far gone to save.

But the society is arguing that it's premature to tear down seven of those structures, and the city's historic preservation and rehabilitation commission concurs.

Unfortunately, while a lot of people are talking about saving the 30 houses and one apartment building, no one actually wants them, city officials say.

Mike Mavis, vice president of the society, is urging the city to take control of seven of the abandoned/unsafe/foreclosed properties and mothball them until developers can be found. Mavis has suggested that the city's new land bank take possession. A land bank is like a public real estate company, operating not for profit.

The seven properties are:

- 117 E. Jefferson St., the 20th Century Flats. The city recently decided that it will offer at least \$300,000 in U.S. Housing and Urban Development funds to help finance the renovation of that apartment building into affordable housing, if a developer can be found.
- 322 E. Washington St., the fire-damaged mansion of J.C. Johnson, a Civil War veteran involved in lumber and Borg Warner Corp. and for whom the county airport, also known as Johnson Field, is named.
- 603 E. Jackson St., an 1870s Italianate home that was lived in by prominent attorney John Ryan. In the 1880s, Ryan remodeled the home into a stick and shingle style with a Moorish interior.
- 703 E. Jackson St., one of the few pre-Civil War structures left in Muncie, according to Mavis. He believes it was built in 1855.
- 901 E. Adams St., built in the 1870s for John Reed, who ran a saw mill. It is the only total board-and-batten house that Mavis knows of in Muncie. Board and batten is also known as barn siding.
- 521 W. Adams St., a grand Queen Anne home built for the Kitselman family, whose company's wire "fenced the West," according to Mavis.
- 609 W. Main St., which Mavis said "is just too intact" to throw away.

Time is running out. The state's historic preservation office already has approved the demolitions, though the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C., still could get involved.

Ball State University graduate students and several faculty also have recommended preserving some of the structures. But developers aren't rushing forward, said Bill Morgan, the city's historic preservation officer. "Aside from a lot of words in the newspaper, I've had exactly one person call and ask if they could acquire one of the properties," Morgan said. "If somebody came forward with a viable plan, we could work it through the land bank.

"But the land bank is brand new and functioning with a fairly minimal amount of money. So you have to be extremely careful to only acquire properties where you can see light at the end of the tunnel. Otherwise, you could bankrupt the land bank before it even gets rolling."



This blighted property at 603 E. Jackson is one of several that the Delaware County Historical Society would like to see mothballed. (The Star Press file photo)

Contact reporter Seth Slabaugh at 213-5834.

Three Muncie homes burn while city awaits demolition approval

BY SETH SLABAUGH -- JANUARY 19, 2011

MUNCIE -- While the city awaits state and federal approval to demolish 30 abandoned homes in historic districts, three of the buildings already have burned.

Which is not surprising.

According to the National Vacant Properties campaign, abandoned properties not only diminish property values, lower tax revenues, discourage investment, increase crime and create environmental and public health problems, they're also fire hazards.

The first house to burn after the city awarded demolition contracts for the 30 sites was 212 N. Pershing Drive (several months ago), followed by 210 E. North St. last month and 418 S. Proud St. this month.

The North Street fire was "definitely arson," said city fire department Battalion Chief Jim Clevenger.

"The fire started on the front porch. It actually started on the outside and burned in."

Firefighters used an aerial ladder truck in fighting the blaze, which threatened vacant houses on either side.

Fires in abandoned structures are particularly dangerous to firefighters.

"Even though it appeared to be vacant, it was a large home divided into as many as three apartments," Clevenger said. "We still had to do search and rescue. These big houses protected by the historical society, my guys have to go in there."

The Proud Street fire also was intentionally set.

"The fire was very similar to North Street," Clevenger said. "It started in the front of the house, on the exterior. It was also vacant. There were no utilities. It was completely abandoned."

Clevenger was unfamiliar with the Pershing Drive fire, and other fire officials were unavailable for comment Tuesday on its cause. But it, too, was abandoned and had no utility service.

When Bill Morgan, the city's historic preservation officer, announced plans to demolish the 30 structures in October, he predicted that "if we don't take them down and nobody is going to adopt them, they would just be demolished by neglect. Meanwhile, while we wait for the last stick to fall, most of them are full of vermin, some are drug houses, and virtually all are subject to vandalism and ripe for arson."

All of the houses are either in neighborhoods on the National Register of Historic Places or of historic value. The government does not permit federal funds to be used in the demolition of historic properties without review on the state and federal levels. The city has received approval from state historic preservation officials to raze the buildings, but is still awaiting approval from the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

But because of the severe damage to the Pershing Drive property, the city already tore it down, and it started demolition this week on Proud Street.

"Sadly, 212 N. Pershing was supposed to be a de-construction," Morgan said. "But that didn't happen. There was nothing left to salvage."

Neighbors of the Proud Street fire complain there are other homes on that block that need to be demolished.

Contact reporter Seth Slabaugh at 213-5834.



Samuel Miles cleans up the property at 418 S. Proud St., Muncie, on Tuesday. (Jeri Reichenadter / The Star Press)

