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Gun factory to be razed

Demolition could begin by early summer, city official says

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ITHACA — After more than a century as an icon on Ithaca's East Hill, the Ithaca Gun factory could be gone by this summer.

Demolition of the dilapidated and environmentally contaminated factory could begin by "late June, early July," said Nels Bohn, director of the Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency. How long it will take to finish demolition will depend on the contractor, but it could be as little as a month, he said.

The project is going forward even though the city has not yet secured a state grant needed to clean up lead and other pollution in the ground around the factory.

Contractors will use standard practices, such as wetting material to minimize dust, Bohn said. Air monitors will be set up around the project and read daily to ensure that contamination from the demolition isn't entering the air and threatening neighbors, he said.

The project will not be enclosed in a tent, as is proposed for a coal tar remediation on Court Street, because it is not believed to be necessary and would be cost prohibitive, he said.

Truck routes for removing debris have not yet been established because no contractor has yet been chosen, but the city can "exert influence" in setting up designated truck routes, he said.

Last fall the City of Ithaca announced a private-public partnership with developer Frost Travis and property owner Wally Diehl to demolish the factory and replace it with 33 high-end condos.

Their plan was dependent on the city receiving two state grants: a Restore NY grant to demolish the factory and an Environmental Restoration Program grant to remediate sub-surface lead contamination in the area around the factory.

Former Governor Eliot Spitzer personally announced that the city received the Restore NY grant, worth \$2.3 million, but the city has no guarantee on the ERP grant.

The Ithaca Gun Company produced munitions and guns, most notably shotguns and rifles, in Ithaca from 1880 to 1986.

Their operations left extensive lead contamination in the factory and in the ground surrounding the factory and leading into Fall Creek.

The Environmental Protection Agency undertook a \$4.8 million cleanup project in Ithaca between 2002 and 2004, but extensive contamination still remains at the site, and in some locations lead-contaminated soil uphill has re-contaminated EPA-cleaned soil downhill.

Testing last November also uncovered trichloroethylene in groundwater near Ithaca Gun well above state standard.

Bohn is overseeing the project for the city. He said that the city is "very confident" that it will eventually get the additional funding needed to complete the project but that "we do not have anything formally in writing."

The ERP program would pay to remediate sub-surface contamination along a strip of land proposed to be donated to the city for a public walkway to the island overlooking Fall Creek. The city has estimated that additional cleanup will cost \$778,000, based on cost to dig down an average of 4 feet and remove contaminated soil.

Based on the almost \$5 million EPA cleanup cost, Bohn admits that cleanup could be significantly more expensive but said that state authorities realize that happens with environmental cleanups.

In estimating cleanup cost, Bohn said the city is "trying to play a balance game here with the state to say, 'it's not so expensive it's out of your budgetary authority to fund this project,' On the other hand, we don't want to short sell it and say it's cheaper than it really is."

"We knew going into this process that they were running out of funds in the program," Bohn said.

If the city demolishes the building and accepts the Restore NY funding but doesn't complete the remediation and redevelop the site, it is possible that the state could ask for its money back, Bohn said, but he doesn't think it's likely.

"I think we could get a knock on the door saying, 'You sold this as a project that was gonna not just knock down a building and clean up the site but was gonna redevelop it.' However, in our application we were upfront saying, you know, this requires ERP funding as well," he said.

Travis said there is a "clawback provision" in the contract with Restore NY but that "I don't know of a case in which the state has ever felt compelled to claw the money back."

"We certainly don't want to leave the project half done. That doesn't do anyone any good," he said.

In 2003, Diehl originally proposed to demolish the gun factory, remediate the site and build up to 160 units of condominiums on the site — a project that would have required no public financing.

Those proposals were abandoned in the face of outcry from neighbors opposed to the scale and the height of the project.

If the ERP funding does not come through, and the property owner does remain responsible for environmental cleanup, the developers could "re-visit that and see if we can make the project feasible in one form or another," Travis said.

Bohn said that could include "(figuring) out a way to cut costs or increase revenues."

"And of course, people's minds start turning around and pretty quickly that becomes, 'Can we increase the number of housing units?'" Bohn said.

For now, the proposal for only 33 units is the one on the table. And the city and the developers remain confident that they will get state funding to remediate the site, confident enough to begin demolition.

"In the worst case, at the very least, a significant public health hazard would be removed. One that is attractive to kids and to teenagers and poses a very real threat to life and limb," Travis said.
