

Wilkes-Barre City seeking forgiveness from county on four properties

By James Conmy
Staff Writer

WILKES-BARRE — Luzerne County commissioners have been asked to forgo a chance at collecting \$103,560 in back taxes on four properties in Wilkes-Barre.

City officials want to acquire the parcels, in some cases demolish the structures, and then turn the land over to developers.

The properties include an abandoned bank building on Public Square, the former Academy Street Market, the former Old River Road Bakery and the Radnor building on

South Washington Street. City council and the Wilkes-Barre Area School District already forgave back taxes on the properties. The county is

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the only local taxing body that has not done so. Commissioners Greg Skrepenak, Stephen Urban and Todd Vonderheid will vote Wednesday on the city's request. Skrepenak and Vonderheid did not raise any concerns during Wilkes-Barre Solicitor Bill Vinsko's

presentation about the properties at Friday's work session.

"The tax forgiveness is contingent on the city becoming owner of the properties," Vinsko said. "There are conditions attached to this forgiveness. It's not like the owners are just going to be allowed to walk away."

Urban is not against the proposal, but wants to see the city's plans for development before he agrees to forgive the taxes.

"All you have to do is show me the plans and what you are doing makes sense," Urban said. "If there are no concrete plans for development, the

homeowners of this county are forced to bear the burden of the lost taxes."

Mayor Tom Leighton said Friday he hoped Urban would forgive the taxes on his word the city will return the properties to the tax rolls. The city's acquisition is essential to their development, Leighton said.

"When you're dealing with developers, you have to be very discreet," the mayor said. "You can't publicly discuss developers' plans. There is always a strict code of confidentiality before you have a signed agreement."

Two developers are examin-

ing the bank building for possible development, the mayor said. A few developers are looking at the former bakery as well.

The Radnor building will be razed as part of the city's planned transportation hub, Leighton said.

The Academy Street Market will likely be demolished for parking.

"These are properties that the owners have just walked away from," Leighton said. "What I want to do is take blight out of that neighborhood."

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