

Property owner sues city for demolition costs

By Denise Allabaugh
Staff Writer

The man who tore down his vacant building on South Main Street in Wilkes-Barre last week plans to sue.

Stephen Seeherman, the owner of 208-214 S. Main St., is seeking more than \$60,000 in demolition costs and other expenses from the city, said his attorney, Bruce Phillips.

Seeherman contends the city held up the progress of the demolition, tripling the costs involved.

Seeherman obtained a demolition permit on April 24, 2003, during former Mayor Tom McGroarty's administration, Phillips said.

But McGroarty later decided the property had historical significance and rescinded the demolition permit in June 2003. Seeherman then sued the city because he still wanted to tear the building down.

The current administration worked with Seeherman to demolish the building. The structure remained vacant for years and deteriorated while being tied up in litigation, Phillips said.

"The cost of demolition tripled because of the city's action," Phillips said. "Theoretically, we weren't able to get in the property to clean it up. It was deplorable. When we went to demolish it, people were running out. On a prior occasion, there was a fugitive hiding out in there."

Wilkes-Barre's assistant solicitor Bill Vinsko said it was not the city's intent to hold up progress.

"From my recollection, there were legitimate historical concerns that needed to be addressed," Vinsko said.

"Obviously, we don't believe we're obligated to pay for it, but we are equally interested in resolving any matter without going to litigation if possible."

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**BRUCE PHILLIPS
STEPHEN SEEHERMAN'S
ATTORNEY**

The building formerly housed Commonwealth Realty, a thrift shop and a restaurant.

Business owners next to the demolished building said it was an eyesore for years. They expect it will remain a vacant lot for some time.

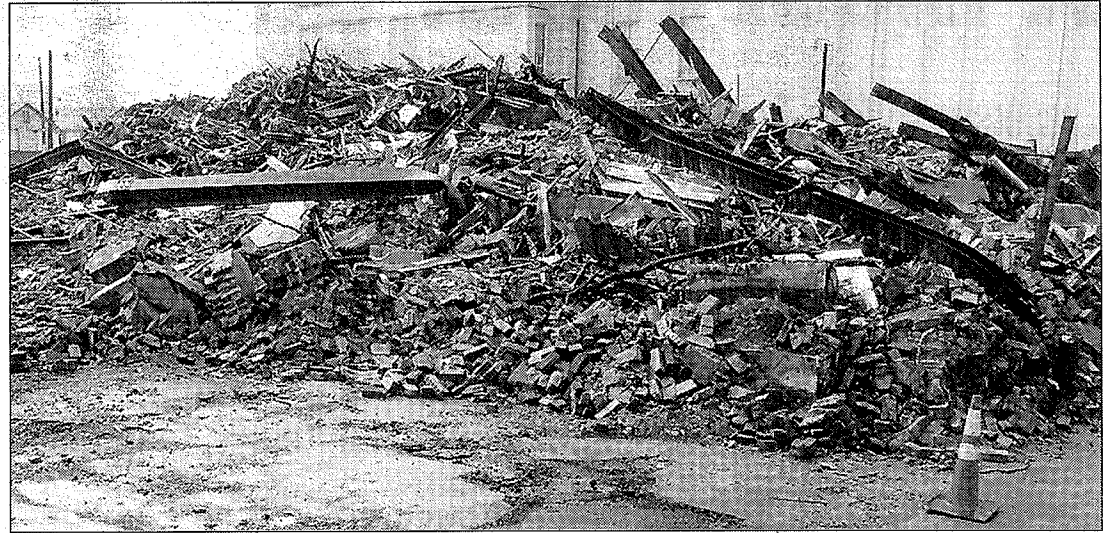
Properties on South Main Street have been difficult to sell, said Sam Wolfe, who owns properties at 219-225 S. Main St. He said Seeherman faced a tough choice.

"He debated whether or not to spend \$300,000 to fix it up and have no tenants or tear it down for a parking lot with nobody to park in it," Wolfe said. "He chose the lesser of the two evils."

Wolfe has tried to sell his South Main Street properties for two-and-a-half years, but has no takers. He rents to the Mystical Tattoo Emporium and the Islamic Education and Information Center.

Wolfe feels city officials are focusing on projects closer to

Seeherman would not discuss the future of the South Main Street site. All that remains now is rubble. The property will temporarily remain a parking lot.

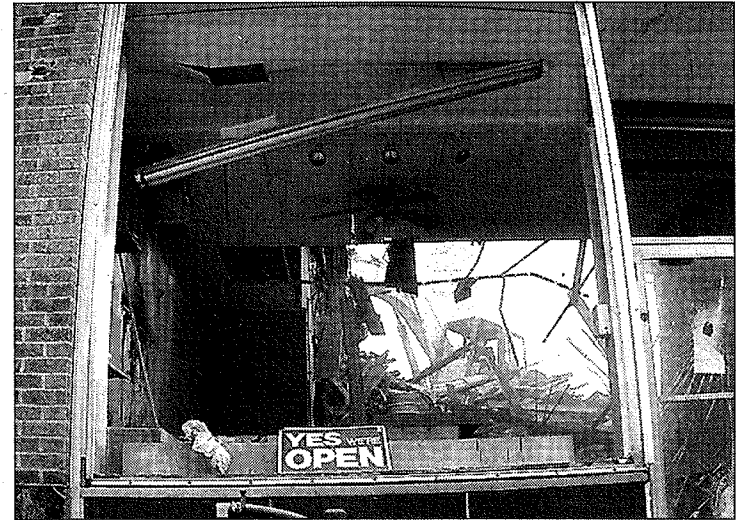


MARK MORAN / CITIZENS' VOICE

Above, all that remains of a former business building on South Main Street is a pile of rubble; at right, a sign reading 'Yes, We're Open' was displayed in a window as crews tore down the property on South Main last week. Stephen Seeherman, property owner, is suing the city to recover more than \$60,000 for demolition costs.

the downtown, such as the Northampton and Main project and the new state building on South Washington Street. He believes it will be a while until downtown revitalization spreads to the third block of South Main Street. "I would like development there, but I don't see it happening."

"Nobody wants to come to Wilkes-Barre. There are a number of reasons," Wolfe said. "Just walk down the first block of South Main Street. Humford Equities hasn't had a tenant in five or six years."



Richard Holthaus of Humford Equities agrees, saying it has been difficult to lease property in downtown Wilkes-Barre. Humford Equities has about 50,000 square feet of vacant property on Public Square, the first block of South Main Street and in Midtown Village, he said. He blames the lack of interest on "the condition of the downtown for a number of years."

With the Northampton and Main project under construction, the start of the street-light project and the canopy removal, Holthaus feels there is finally "an upturn in interest."

"We're hopeful that we will be signing a number of leases in the next few months," Holthaus said.

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