

June 5, 2014

Kasson school's new owners told to stop work

KASSON - A local preservation group acquired the 1918 Kasson school on May 29, ending a drama-filled decade full of lawsuits and public grumbling all aimed at preventing the city from tearing it down.

However, a meeting is scheduled for today in hopes of working through a new controversy that's popped up since the \$240,000 transaction was completed.

Kasson City Administrator Randy Lenth said the local group - formally known as the 1918 Kasson Public School Limited Liability Limited Partnership, an offshoot of the Kasson Alliance for Restoration - was presented a cease-and-desist order Monday after city officials discovered "people were in there sweeping and trying to clean up black mold and asbestos with absolutely no safety gear."

"There are very specific codes and guidelines from the (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency) on dealing with these things ... and they were knee deep in these hazardous materials," said Lenth, who also expressed "confusion" over who exactly is behind the partnership that purchased the building.

That claim hasn't been well-received by members of the preservation group, who claim they have the authority to be inside the building and the city is overstating its health concerns.

Kenton Spading, of the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, said the cease-and-desist order is the result of a "misunderstanding" involving the state fire marshal's standing order that included a June 1 deadline to fix wooden beams supporting the roof. Spading said he's sent the city paperwork that includes approval of a 90-day extension to "show progress" on repairs.

Spading and Dodge County Commissioner Rodney Peterson - who said his name was registered as the LLLP creator with the Minnesota Secretary of State out of "convenience" but denies any other involvement - also takes issue with Lenth's characterization of the building that was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.

"We have asked the city for documentation, a letter or report, to show there's asbestos in the building and they haven't produced it," Spading said. "It doesn't pass the smell test."

Peterson was even more direct in his criticism.

"That structure was probably one of the strongest in Dodge County (in 2007)," Peterson said. "Since the city took it over, they have been negligent in maintaining it. They've always had the philosophy of destroying this structure without doing something to better the community."

"The city has done everything it can to make this sound like a rat hole, but it really only has some cosmetic issues that have to be rectified," he said.

That fundamental dispute is reflected in varying estimated costs to renovate it. The city rejected the idea of renovation, saying it would require up to \$10 million. But Spading says a consultant from Kansas is estimating just \$5 million to turn the building into a low-income housing complex.

Clint Jayne, of Cohen-Esrey Real Estate Services, based in Mission, Kan., plans to apply for Minnesota housing tax credits to offset those costs. The first round of tax credit winners will be announced this fall and the second in January. Though similar applications have already been denied twice, Spading feels the county's projected growth and proximity to the Destination Medical Center initiative in Rochester could now help its cause.

Jayne has offered to purchase the old school for \$265,000, contingent upon receiving the tax credits. If the application is again rejected, the preservation group will consider proposals from other developers.

The preservation group was able to purchase the school after Kasson residents Chris Cuomo and Linda Jerviss filed a lawsuit to block its demolition in 2013. That ended up giving the group until May 31 to raise \$240,000 to purchase the building.

Through a series of donations and investors and a mailing list that includes 600 supporters, Spading and the preservation group were able to reach that goal last week with 48 hours to spare.