Downtown Demolition

Parking lot could erase historic site

By SARA BONGIORNI and CHAD CALDER

Bob Dean, the developer who spent more than a decade polishing his reputation as a champion of historic properties, plans to demolish the historic Kress building downtown and put in a surface parking lot.

The demolition could happen in the next few weeks, said Fred Raiford, the city-parish director of public works.

The plan would put another parking lot along Third Street in the heart of downtown Baton Rouge. It also would demolish the site of 1960s lunch-counter sit-ins that helped to end racial segregation at public buildings in the United States.

Local preservationists met with Dean on Monday after learning last week that he had been granted a demolition permit to destroy the building.

Dean, who could not be reached Tuesday for comment, formed Dean Parking LLC and bought the building in August from Giuliano and Annette Bubola and Paul Pirello for $900,000.

Court records show Dean paid $200,000 up front and will pay the remaining $700,000 by Aug. 28, 2005.

The building started as two structures but has since merged into one. The Welsh & Levy building was constructed in 1885 at Main and Third streets. The "L" shaped Kress building, built in 1910, wraps around it.

The Kress building's role in the civil rights struggle began in 1960, when a group of seven Southern University students were refused service at its lunch counter.

The case sprang from their subsequent arrests eventually landed before the U.S. Supreme Court, which reversed Louisiana court decisions upholding "separate but equal" laws.

Kress also once housed a bustling department store that sold Boy Scout supplies and attracted local children with its famous soda fountain.

The building most recently was used for offices but has been vacant for years.

"The foundation considers Bob a preservationist, and we just want him to do the right thing by these buildings," said Carolyn Bennett, executive director of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana. "We want to help him in any way we can."

The Kress building and the Welsh & Levy building, which once housed a men's clothing store, are eligible for the National Registrar of Historic Places, Bennett said.

That issue was not a factor in the city-parish granting Dean the permit needed to tear down the building, Raiford said.

"At this point nobody's telling me not to issue the permit," Raiford said.

Dean was granted the permit on Sept. 19. It lists no date for the demolition. Raiford said it was his understanding the building would be destroyed in early October.

Raiford said he did not know how many parking spaces a new lot would add to downtown, where construction of a new arts center and other projects have made downtown a more viable place.

Police Officer C.E. Jeffries leads Marvin Robinson from a 1960 civil rights sit-in by seven Southern University students who were refused service at Kress Department Store's lunch counter.

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parking scarce in some areas.

Bennett said she was encouraged by the Monday meeting with Dean and John Wilbert, a member of the foundation’s board.

“We’ve begun the dialogue on how these buildings can be saved,” she said.

The issue confronting Dean is finding a use for the building that makes sense from a financial standpoint, Bennett said.

She said Dean was non-committal but that “if anyone can make the numbers work, it’s Bob.”

Dean also is looking to ensure adequate parking for the downtown offices he owns, she said.

Parking has become a serious concern for several downtown business owners. The state’s construction of an arts complex bound in part by North Boulevard has made daytime parking difficult in the south side of the central business district, according to numerous downtown business owners.

Dean’s plans are at odds not only with those concerned with downtown’s history but those working to shape its future.

Plan Baton Rouge, the 1998 urban planning initiative that has become the blueprint for downtown development, singled out the abundance of surface parking as a major strike against downtown.

The Kress building, left, an L-shaped structure built in 1910 that became the 1960s site for a civil rights sit-in, wraps around the Welsh & Levy building on the right, built in 1885 at Main and Third streets. A demolition permit for the buildings has been issued to Dean Parking LLC.

Andres Duany, the Miami-based new urbanist designer who spearheaded the effort, said surface parking is unattractive and an inefficient use of space.

Davis Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District, said his office has gotten calls about the impending demolition but hasn’t had a chance to talk to Dean.

He agreed that surface lots are something downtown has been trying to phase out.

“In the spirit of Plan Baton Rouge, we want to move to a higher and better use of property than surface parking,” he said.

“That’s why you’ve seen the attraction of more parking garages with shared uses. That is our goal.”