

Dead deals put property in limbo; Toledo orders rubble at Haughton Elevator site removed



Where once stood a champion of Toledo industry, now rests piles of broken concrete and twisted metal.

Curious motorists along the Anthony Wayne Trail crane their necks toward the rubble resting inside the chain-link fence. Nearby residents, meanwhile, continue shaking their heads over the wreckage outside their doors.

Despite appearances, the old Haughton Elevator Co. plant in South Toledo is not the site of an air raid or bomb blast. Its debris piles are the fallout of a different event: a pair of property deals that were ultimately shot down by the city.

The most recent deal fell through last summer after Do-It-Yourself Pull-A-Part Used Auto Parts of Atlanta, bowing to criticism from residents and pressure from city officials, pulled its plans for building an automotive parts salvage yard on the former Haughton plant and office at 671 Spencer St., just north of the Toledo Zoo.

Pull-A-Part then terminated the company's \$1.4 million contract to buy the 22.7-acre site from JCV 671 LLC, an entity co-owned by area business executive Craig Valentine.

But by that time, late July, the Haughton buildings had been demolished by JCV's hired contractors. The work had been under way since April.

"We had a contract, and as part of that contract, we had to demolish the buildings," Mr. Valentine said last week.

And to the frustration of many neighborhood residents such as Lisa Williams, the rubble has not moved since.

"Why tear it down and just leave it sit like that?," asked Ms. Williams, 44. "It would have been better to just leave the building standing. When you look out the window, that's your view - all that rubble."

Eight months and one federal court lawsuit later, the debris is now scheduled to be pulverized by concrete-crushing machines next month and removed from the industrial-zoned property at JCV's expense. The contractor is Miller Brothers Construction of Archbold.

To speed the process, the city this month filed a criminal complaint against JCV in Toledo Municipal Court for failure to remove demolition debris.

"I want it done by the first of May," Mayor Carty Finkbeiner said last week.

But clearing the land is different from cleaning up the mess. Pull-A-Part and JCV are still battling in U.S. District Court in Toledo and Mr. Valentine said he is unsure whether a buyer will ever approach him again for the property because the city has opposed two prospective deals in a row.

"The city killed both of them," Mr. Valentine said. "No one will go in with this type of track record - two strikes."

Haughton Elevator was founded in Toledo in 1867 by Nathaniel Haughton, who had been a colonel during the Civil War. The company built its Spencer Street facility in 1916, and became the nation's third-largest manufacturer of elevators behind Otis and Westinghouse. Its machines were installed in department stores and office towers throughout the country, and later even rocket launching pads in Cape Canaveral, Fla.

Haughton merged in 1957 with the Toledo Scale Co., which was later acquired by Reliance Electric Co. In 1979 Swiss elevator maker Schindler Group AG bought the company and changed its name to Schindler-Haughton before eventually dropping the Haughton.

Ten years later, the Swiss firm closed the 250,000 square-foot headquarters and plant on Spencer Street, and moved some workers to a smaller facility in the Wolf Creek Business Park in Springfield Township.

Then in 2004 Mr. Valentine and a partner bought the property and its vacant buildings for \$732,000 with the intent to use them as warehouse space for another business. But once those plans changed, the owners were left with unneeded buildings and an annual \$30,000 property tax bill.

So they put the property up for sale, and in 2005 struck a deal for \$1.75 million with the Toledo Academy of Learning. The charter school was looking to expand, and was ready to renovate the Houghton offices into classroom space and the warehouse into a gymnasium. There were also plans to plant grassy fields for playing ball.

"They had their financing secure, and all they needed was the plan commission and City Council" approvals, Mr. Valentine recalled.

But in the end both the commission and council went against the school's requests for a zoning change and special-use permit. The prevailing arguments were that the Houghton land should remain available for industrial use, and that filling it with a school would contradict the city's economic development goals.

Yet Mr. Valentine continues to suspect that his land deal became caught in the middle of a debate over the merits of charter schools, a controversial topic among some lawmakers and educators.

He said that at the proposal's public hearing, critics of Toledo Academy's plan often expressed opposition to charter schools in general.

"They made the project a referendum on charter schools," Mr. Valentine said.

City planner Tom Lemon recalled how the proposal drew a great deal of opposition at the meeting from neighbors, who submitted a petition with nearly 300 signatures. However, the petition stated that it opposed the school for the reason of saving the land ready for economic development.

"There was certainly an element that they were supporting the local public schools," Mr. Lemon said of the charter school's opponents. "But there were a number of issues."

Stung by the deal's collapse, Mr. Valentine said he took the city's advice and found a buyer looking to build something zoned industrial: Pull-A-Part. The company stocks its branch salvage yards with hundreds of used vehicles, and customers pay to disassemble whatever parts they need for their vehicles.

To Mr. Valentine's dismay, the opposition to the Pull-A-Part proposal was just as fierce as that against the charter school, if not more so, and this time included Mayor Finkbeiner.

The company withdrew its application for its special-use permit after a June community meeting about the project. Without a permit, the deal was over.

In September JCV filed its lawsuit against Pull-A-Part's allied real-estate company, MMA Management LLC, claiming breach of contract.

The lawsuit seeks \$225,000 from the company for not paying a deposit for the demolition work and for withdrawing its permit request before the commission's official vote.

The Pull-A-Part entity disputes the owners' claim to the demolition money, and has filed a counterclaim seeking the return of a separate \$25,000 deposit. The case continues as both parties failed this month to reach settlement.

Mr. Valentine and city officials have also been in development talks with race car driver Adam Andretti, the younger brother of veteran racer John Andretti. The younger Andretti was considering opening a hotel and indoor water park on the Houghton land after the Pull-A-Part deal fell through.

Yet the Andretti deal, at best, appears at a standstill.

"That's an absolute pipe dream," Mr. Valentine said. "There was no money, no financing, it was senseless basically."

Mr. Valentine has since asked the plan commission to consider a zoning change next month to commercial to make the property more attractive to buyers.

Contact JC Reindl at:

jreindl@theblade.com

or 419-724-6065.