

# Former Brooklyn YMCA, long empty, will be razed; housing project planned (photos, video)



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CLEVELAND, Ohio – A decade after the **YMCA of Greater Cleveland** shut the doors at the Brooklyn Y on the city's West Side, the four-story building is stripped, strewn with broken glass and set to be demolished.

On Thursday, the **Cleveland Landmarks Commission** gave its approval for the 1950s building to be razed later this year. The Y isn't a city landmark, but it sits in a local historic district that falls on the commission's watch. On Wednesday, a city design-review committee also lent its support to the demolition request.

Since the YMCA closed the facility in September 2006, the building has been a subject of debate, frustration and strife in the city's Brooklyn Centre neighborhood. Now a plan is afoot to replace the structure, and a vacant warehouse next door, with an apartment building that will house chronically homeless people.

Tired of the break-ins, busted windows and general air of abandonment, neighbors are ready for the former Y to come down. And after community meetings, residents appear open to the concept of **permanent supportive housing**, though a few critics continue to clamor for other types of construction on the site, which sits along a struggling commercial corridor where West 25<sup>th</sup> Street gives way to Pearl Road, south of Interstate 71.

First, Cleveland Councilman Tony Brancatelli says, "we have to clean up some of the messes around us to start attracting private development."

## A fitness center now unfit for habitation

The former YMCA certainly qualifies as a mess.

Graffiti rings the swimming pool, where vandals have tossed old electronics, furniture and trash. Water drips from collapsing ceilings and puddles underfoot. The only remnants of the small apartments that used to fill a three-level residential wing are outlines on the floors. Everything was gutted after the Y made its exit.

The **Cuyahoga County Land Reutilization Corp.**, often called the Cuyahoga Land Bank, took possession of the building in August 2015, accepting the real estate to end battles over building-code violations and more than \$85,000 in unpaid property taxes. After wiping the slate clean, the land bank will demolish the Y and the adjacent warehouse, preparing the land to be transferred to a partnership between **Cleveland Housing Network** and **EDEN, Inc.**

The two nonprofit housing developers expect to apply for **federal low-income housing tax credits** for the project next year. If the competitive credits come through, the land will change hands by mid-2018. The 66-unit apartment building, a roughly \$12 million project, could open during the summer of 2019.

If the partners don't win credits, they'll reapply the following year or reevaluate the site for other potential affordable-housing investments, project manager Jillian Watson said.

Cleveland Housing Network has had its eye on the property for at least seven years, as part of a **broad, multi-organization push** to end chronic homelessness in Cuyahoga County. But real estate tangles made it impossible to pursue anything concrete before now.

Public records show that the YMCA sold the building in June 2007 for just \$125,000, to a group led by an investor named Robert McCall. At the time of the sale, Cuyahoga County estimated that the property was worth nearly \$2.3 million. Real estate filings show that the buyer quickly placed a \$500,000 mortgage, from a company tied to McCall, on the building.

Neighborhood representatives say McCall's group came up with big ideas – an indoor fish farm, for example, or a comedy hall of fame. Nothing panned out. The foreclosure crisis deepened and the recession slammed city neighborhoods, forcing development to a halt. Tax delinquencies accumulated. So did building-code violations and court cases.

"There were a lot of folks who looked at redevelopment activity over there," Brancatelli said. "Nobody could make sense of the numbers. It would have required a lot of subsidy. ... It became a real sore subject amongst the residents, and I do feel for residents when everyone else is honestly paying their tax bills and being a responsible citizen. The tax bills here were just piling up. And nobody was paying."

In 2010, the property passed from one company tied to McCall to another. In 2014, as pressure from Cleveland City Council members and building officials mounted, the increasingly dilapidated former Y transferred several times, apparently without any money changing hands.

Councilman Brian Cummins continued to monitor the property even after it shifted out of his ward and into Brancatelli's. Cummins recalls waking up one Saturday morning with the former YMCA on his mind and pulling up the property records, only to find that the building had passed to an inactive foundation associated with New York soul singer Melba Moore.

"I thought, 'What the hell is this?'" he said. "I went on Google and looked it up."

By late morning, Cummins was on the phone with the singer, trying to persuade her that accepting the blighted building had been a mistake. Public records show the foundation got rid of the property after less than a month, giving it to yet another limited liability company tied to McCall. Every ownership change made it more difficult to pursue a tax-foreclosure case or to figure out who, exactly, to chase down regarding Cleveland Housing Court complaints.

The city condemned the building in mid-2014, court records show.

Four months later, the property changed hands again, ending up with a nonprofit group that provides housing and support to ex-convicts and homeless men. A year later, though, that nonprofit ceded the building to the land bank to avoid a foreclosure.

"I believe their intention was always to buy and flip that property," Cummins said of the investors behind the various entities that owned the building for most of the past 10 years. "But they got their [butts] kicked because of the foreclosure crisis and the financial crisis."

### **A redevelopment project that didn't pencil**

Cleveland Housing Network studied whether it could reuse the building for permanent supportive housing or affordable housing. But the layout of the former Y yielded only 30 units, based on standards for such apartment developments. That's half the size of the nonprofit's typical apartment building constructed jointly with EDEN, also known as Emerald Development & Economic Network, Inc.

Putting full-priced apartments in the building also seemed nearly impossible. Damage – what Cummins described as "botched-up deconstruction work" – hurt the structure's chances to qualify for historic preservation tax credits, which developers have used to make the costs work on other building conversions in Cleveland. Rents in the Brooklyn Centre neighborhood are much lower

than they are in hot West Side neighborhoods such as Ohio City and Tremont.

"If there was something else that we could have done, we've explored it, and nothing else has emerged in the last 10 years," said Jeff Ramsey, executive director of the **Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization**, a nonprofit neighborhood group with a satellite office responsible for Brooklyn Centre.

Demolishing the former Y could cost \$325,000 to \$375,000, said Gus Frangos, president of the land bank. Razing the adjacent warehouse, which is privately owned, could cost another \$100,000, according to estimates from Cleveland Housing Network.

The land bank will tap up to \$200,000 in Cuyahoga County demolition funds to help tear the buildings down. The housing developers will shoulder the remaining costs, reimbursing the land bank when the property sale occurs. And the developers will buy the warehouse for \$250,000.

"Worst case, we would remove the blight and keep it as a development site. But Housing First has a pretty darn good track record," Frangos said of the consortium of partners that works with Cleveland Housing Network and EDEN to fight long-term homelessness.

Designs for the apartment building aren't done yet, though the developers shared very early conceptual images this week. The Landmarks Commission and other public bodies will see final designs after a series of community meetings, architect Tony Hiti said.

Now that the land bank's process is clear and word about new construction is trickling out, Brancatelli and Cummins are receiving inquiries from investors who want to be nearby.

Cummins said a possible light-industrial user has asked about the southern portion of the former YMCA property, which Cleveland Housing Network doesn't expect to use because of engineering challenges. Such a project might also include retail and offices, he said.

"Permanent supportive housing is in some very strong neighborhoods," Brancatelli said. "It's not just something that you tuck in the corner of a derelict neighborhood. And these are beautiful projects. If you're a developer coming in, in terms of having an anchor, they're a good anchor."