

Second downtown building suffers collapse

Written by Kerry Craig

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City manager says inspections of neighboring structures ongoing

For the second time in just over a month, a building in the first block of Main Street has collapsed. This time, the old Knight's Head Inn building suffered major damage when the facade of the historic building shifted and began settling.

The building, recently purchased by Emily and Garrett Glass and her parents, Bill and Gina Wilder, was in the beginning stages of renovation, according to City Manager Marc Maxwell.

"This is a product of demolition," Maxwell said. "At some point during the demolition, the two main support beams at the front of the building shifted to the right. When they shifted off their footing, the facade dropped about three inches — this was a renovation project."

Believing the building to be a hazard, Maxwell ordered Main Street closed and the area around and in front of the building further fenced off. Police officers were posted to the area to keep spectators a safe distance away.

"It's a danger to the public if they are anywhere near it, so we kept them away for the night," he said.

On Wednesday morning, representatives of a structural engineering firm, building owners and their renovation contractor were surveying the building and planning a strategy, the city manager said.

"Today, they will shore up the ceiling on the first floor and second floor," Maxwell said. "I think tomorrow they will begin removing the entire facade."

Emily Glass said priorities include safety and preserving the historical structure.

"We are going to try to save the building as much as we can without it being a safety hazard for anybody. They are going to brace the wall today and then we will know more after that," she said. "We don't know a whole lot yet but, right now, safety is the priority. The second priority is trying to keep the historical integrity of the building intact."

Glass said she and her family want to bring the historic building to its original appearance.

"Before yesterday, we had planned on renovating the building," she said. "We had in the works a balcony for the second story. We were going to put in nine-foot doors, three on the bottom, and have it very open in keeping with the direction the town is going. We wanted to bring it back to its glory; it's what we really wanted. I've always loved that building."

About a month ago, the walls of the building owned by Keith Bland, CPA, located just across the street from the Knight's Head Inn came crashing down and prompted the city to begin an evaluation of a number of historic downtown buildings. Then, last week, the cafeteria roof at the Hopkins County Boys and Girls Club (old Houston Elementary School) caved in. No one was injured in any of the the collapses.

The city manager said several problems have been identified.

"I can tell you that this building is a much different issue than Keith Bland or the issue at the old Houston School," Maxwell said. "In both cases, those could have been prevented with maintenance on the wall in one case and the roof on the other."

Maxwell said that problems have been identified in several other buildings.

"We have identified seven, possibly eight now with their walls," he said as he indicated another building on the south side of Main Street. "We are looking at one right here — it is a

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wall where the brick has been deteriorating, the mortar is deteriorating and it is going to continue to do so until it collapses — just like Keith Bland's building — unless we require the owners of the buildings to maintain their walls, and that's exactly what's going to happen.”

The city manager said the city is working to help building owners identify and rectify any structural problems.

“I can tell you that, thus far, we've paid for the engineer to make a determination on each of the walls as to whether there is any pressing threat,” Maxwell said. “The next step would be to make recommendations to the owners.

“So, I am going to extend that invitation,” he said. “We are not going to design a project, we will make some recommendations and will pay for that in the interest of public safety. The onus will be on the owners to take that recommendation and do it or do something else.”