

Manassas - Historic buildings City, County Officials Deny Rumors of 'Deal'

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Officials from both Manassas and Prince William County say reports of a deal to push through the demolition request for six county buildings in the city are not true.

According to a story in Wednesday's edition of the *Potomac News* attributed to unnamed sources, the board of county supervisors agreed to sell the old Bennett School to the city for a nominal fee in exchange for a demolition permit for the other buildings. The Bennett School, which houses the county's police department, is not one of the six slated to be torn down.

"There's not any kind of agreement," said Councilman Maury Gerson. "The only thing we're talking about now is what we'd like to save, if anything, and what we want to do with it."

Gerson said that the city has discussed acquiring the Bennett School for a number of years.

"There's been some talk of possibly using it as a joint civic center," he said. "But no deal has been cut."

Vice Mayor James Payne said the city/county negotiating committee "has discussed as far back as two years ago what to do with the courthouse and the Bennett School . . . but that was long before there was any request for a demolition permit."

But Payne, who is a member of the city/county committee, said, "I have never agreed at anytime to

bypass the ARB."

Mayor Edgar Rohr and Councilman John Weber will be sent to the ARB, Payne said, but only to "let them know what the county is doing in offers for acquisition of property."

Weber and Rohr will also explain why the council decided to take no action on a request from the ARB for a time extension on a decision on the permit.

"If we already had an agreement, why go to the ARB to give them information," said Weber, who is also a member of the city/county committee.

"We can't tell the ARB what to do; they're an independent board," Weber added. The council voted to take no action on the extension request because "the county wouldn't agree to that, but we're not going to tell the (ARB) how to vote. There are no backroom deals between the city and the county."

"I'm only going to the ARB as an observer," said Rohr. "We're interested in the old Bennett Building, but we've talked about that for a long time."

Rohr said that the council had discussed whether to try to acquire any of the six buildings in the demolition request, but decided that "they are not in good enough condition to keep."

Council members Beth MacDonald and Robert Browne also said there is no agreement between the county and the city concerning the demolition permit.

Browne said that the story in the *Potomac News* was
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"factually wrong. There is absolutely no agreement."

Ed King, who is the chairman of the board of supervisors, said that the county has no plans for the property where the six buildings are located. "We just want to clean up the area, it's a blight."

He added, "I have certainly not been informed of any agreement and I haven't participated in any agreement," with the city on the matter.

The six buildings, which include the Bennett Annex; the old 1892 jail, which was built at the same time as the old courthouse; and several other buildings near the old courthouse, are in very poor condition, King said.

"We have not agreed to sell or give" the Bennett School to the city, said Brentsville Supervisor Joseph Reading, who is a member of the negotiating committee.

That committee has had discussions "hinged around the fact that the city council would like to see Bennett (School) and the courthouse

saved, but there are no agreements," Reading said. The county has promised to save those two buildings, and they are not included in the demolition permit.

John Payne, chairman of the ARB, said that he has not been approached by any city officials concerning the demolition permit, and if he was, "that's not going to change the way I look at it."

"At this point I don't see any overriding reason to tear down (the Bennett Annex and the old jail)," he added, "but up until the moment I vote, my mind is not made up."

If the ARB denies the permit, or any portion of the demolition request, the county can appeal the matter to the city council.

But there appears to be no consensus on the council as to whether it would approve the demolition.

MacDonald indicated that she probably would vote to save at least one of the buildings, if the matter came to a vote in the council.

"I just feel that it's been to fast and furious," she said.

Browne said that he hasn't decide how he would vote, until he had more information on the condition of the buildings and alternatives to demolition.

The ARB will be considering the request at it's next meeting, scheduled for Thursday, July 24.