Fund would help save old buildings in Albany

Lawmaker wants to tab $150,000 for grants to prevent building decay

By JORDAN CARLEO-EVANGELIST Staff writer

Updated 07:51 a.m., Tuesday, September 13, 2011

Officials look over the situation of a partial building collapse at the former city firehouse at the corner of Swan and Jefferson streets in the Hudson/Park neighborhood on Wednesday morning, Sept. 8, 2011 in Albany. (Paul Buckowski / Times Union)

ALBANY -- A county lawmaker wants to redirect $150,000 earmarked this year for demolishing decrepit buildings to create a new fund that would give property owners grants to prevent the weather damage that often speeds the buildings' decay.

County Legislator Christopher Higgins, with backing by members of the Historic Albany Foundation, announced the plan Monday in front of former Engine No. 6, a boarded-up firehouse at the corner of Swan and Jefferson streets that suffered a partial roof collapse during heavy rain last week.

Higgins bills the new fund -- which would provide up to $10,000 grants for roof and window repair -- as a way to spare all county taxpayers the expense of subsidizing the demolition of collapsing buildings, which he said they have done to the tune of $809,000 since 2009 alone.

"This legislation affects taxpayers throughout the county," Higgins said. "That money is not just money that city taxpayers pay."

The burden is a function of the way Albany County forecloses on tax-delinquent properties.

When the city orders a building demolished because it poses an immediate threat to public safety, it then bills the property owner for the costs, which vary according to the size of the building and average in the tens of thousands of dollars.

If the property owners don't pay the city back, the tab is ultimately added to their tax bills. If those taxes aren't paid, the county then makes the city whole for the debt and can move to take the property through foreclosure.

Higgins, a Democrat who represents Albany's downtown neighborhoods around Center Square, said the fund dovetails with other efforts in city government to boost the accountability of the owners of vacant and abandoned buildings.

Last month, Common Councilman Dominick Calsolaro introduced legislation that would require vacant building owners to post at least a $10,000 bond to protect the city against the costs of razing the buildings should they collapse.

The measure is aimed, in part, at reining in speculation by landlords who buy tax-foreclosed properties on the cheap from the county and sit on them, allowing them to decay without further investment, while trying to flip them for a profit.

In order to qualify for a grant for roof and window repair, owners would need to adhere to the requirements of the city's Vacant and Abandoned Buildings Registry, which requires them to secure the building, file a plan for its maintenance and pay an annually escalating registration fee for keeping it vacant.

In future years, the fund would be replenished with half the proceeds of the county's foreclosure auctions. Higgins is calling for $250,000 to be budgeted for the account next year -- half the $500,000 he said the county budgeted this year for demolition and stabilization of foreclosed properties.

"We'll obviously need to take a closer look," said Mary Duryea, a spokeswoman for Albany County Executive Michael Breslin, "It has potential, but we'll have to look at it in the context of the budget."

Susan Holland, executive director of the Historic Albany Foundation, said the fund makes sense because it aids preventive maintenance that will save taxpayers money in the long run, while helping preserve the city's older buildings.

"Like the old saying goes," Holland said, "a stitch in time saves nine."

Reach Jordan Carleo-Evangelist at 454-5445, jcarleo-evangelist@timesunion.com or on Twitter @JCEvangelist_TU

Read more: http://www.timesunion.com/local/article/Fund-would-help-save-old-buildings-in-Albany-2167056.php#ixzz1Y7g36aJB