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Nuisance Factor

A new asbestos-removal plan is keeping the derelict Cowtown Inn standing.

By DAWN REISS

At one time, the Cowtown Inn was a bustling landmark, a place where celebrities like Dolly Parton and Willie Nelson stopped in to take a dip in a pool shaped like a Texas star. The motel was prominently located on Lancaster Avenue in the Handley area, just east of Loop 820, on what used to be the main road connecting Fort Worth to Dallas.

Then came the construction of Interstate 30. As traffic on Lancaster grew sparser, so did customers at the Cowtown. The motel itself closed about 15 years ago, followed a few years later by its restaurant.

When the city of Fort Worth condemned the abandoned inn, Emily Burt was 3 years old.

Now she is 17, a senior at the nearby Fort Worth Heritage Christian Academy. But the inn still stands. Cracks mar the windows and doors, and shabby furniture is scattered around the rooms. The pool, for years an unlovely reservoir for stagnant water, trash, and mosquitoes, was filled in with dirt this year. Drug dealers and the homeless have moved in, burning old newspapers and furniture to keep warm.

Demolishing the nine asbestos-laden buildings would be a chore under any circumstances. But in this case, the city's attempt to get Environmental Protection Agency approval for a new demolition process has already added more



than a year to the length of time the neighborhood has had to put up with a major eyesore and health hazard.

What's more, continued delays are probable, in part because of disagreements within the EPA about whether the proposed "wet" demolition process would actually be more dangerous for the neighborhood. City officials said that they are satisfied with the safety of the proposed demolition and are convinced that EPA approval will be forthcoming.

The city seized the property in January 2001, by which time unpaid taxes totalled about \$750,000. Officials assured the inn's neighbors that the blight would be taken care of. Since then, however, the city has blamed lack of funds and problems with asbestos for its failure to demolish the motel.

Two years ago, students at the Fort Worth Heritage Christian Academy took on the issue of the motel as a class project, a way to learn about government. They brought their concerns to the city council, but felt that little was done.

They tried again in February of this year. Armed with a petition signed by more than 1,700 residents, Burt and 40 of her classmates went back to City Hall — and city leaders promised, again, Burt said, that the problem would be taken care of.

"They made a promise and didn't keep it," Burt said. The [city council] promised us they were going to do something and follow through. ... It reflects poorly on the community."

"And now we wait," said Kathy Burt, Emily's mother and administrator of the Fort Worth Heritage Christian Academy. It was she who suggested the class project. "It's frustrating. I know it's a money issue and bureaucracy takes time, but it's been 15 years, and they need to do something."

Now Kathy Burt receives monthly letters detailing the city's progress, or lack of it. The letters list twice-a-week checks done by code compliance officers, and city crews have to deal with the endless litany of broken windows, graffiti, illegal dumping, or damaged fencing that the code enforcers find. Such maintenance has cost the city about \$30,000 to \$60,000, according to Pat Conrad, senior code enforcement official.

Demolishing a building the size of the Cowtown Inn could cost the city about \$300,000, plus another \$600,000 for asbestos abatement, Conrad said, whereas wet demolition would cost about \$400,000 total. Cost for the wet demolition study — called Project XL — would be about \$1 million.

Traditionally, owners are required to remove asbestos before a building can be demolished. Wet demolition, because it allows buildings to be taken down with asbestos still in place, could save money in the long run. Using that process, a building being demolished is subjected to heavy misting to wash asbestos particles out of the air. The process itself is not new. But normally it is used only when a building is in imminent danger of collapsing.

The city has proposed to the EPA that it be allowed to test the use of wet demolition on buildings not near collapse, using the Cowtown Inn as a case study. If the project leads the EPA to approve wet demolition for most asbestos-laden buildings, the city could save 40 to 60 percent in future demolition costs — and asbestos-related demolition rules could change nationwide.

Those, apparently, are two big "ifs."

The city has already received EPA approval for and carried out the first phase of the project — wet demolition of a building with very low levels of asbestos. A condemned house on Ennis Avenue was demolished by that method in April 2001.

Since then, however, the EPA and city have been passing paperwork back and forth, as the city seeks approval of a plan for Phase 2. In that phase, the city hopes to knock down at least two and maybe more of the nine Cowtown Inn buildings. Two identical buildings would be demolished side by side, one using wet and the other traditional demolition with traditional asbestos removal and abatement procedures. The EPA and city would monitor airborne pollution in both buildings, to see which produced the least asbestos contamination.

Kathryn Hansen, Fort Worth environmental coordinator, said she believes the plan is very close to being approved. While acknowledging that some EPA officials have concerns, she said the agency's regional director is behind the city proposal.

"While I thought we'd be farther along than this, as long as we are moving forward, I am happy," she said.

Hansen's boss, city environmental director Brian Boerner, estimated that it could be another six months or more before demolition begins on Cowtown Inn.

Businessman Don Hicks is convinced it will take another year. "They are moving at the speed of a glacier," he said. "I think the city should just take care of it without waiting for EPA approval."

If and when the EPA accepts the plan, it must be posted for public comment for 30 days, then reviewed by the state

health department and approved by the Texas Board of Health. Only after that would the city seek a demolition contractor.

But the people living and working in the area aren't satisfied. "I wish they would tear it down," said Tricia Tinsley, who lives across the street. "A vacant lot would be better than looking at that."

Tinsley, 58, has lived here her whole life. The homes of her mother and two brothers are on the same street, and one brother also owns and rents out two other nearby houses.

Tinsley recently put her house on the market. She wants to relocate to a better area. However, "We don't think it will sell because no one wants to live across from that," she said, pointing across the street to the inn. "There are mice and rats over there, and they are coming across the street into the house. My brother and mother are having breathing problems for the past couple of years, and I think it's all from over there."

Most health problems caused by asbestos occur when asbestos tile, shingles, or other products are broken up and small particles become airborne. Boerner said he doubts that the health problems experienced by Tinsley's family members are caused by asbestos.

"The amount of asbestos that goes into the air is very minimal. You'd have to have significant exposure, and it doesn't show until 25 years after you have disease," he said. He said some asbestos could become airborne when old walls, ceilings, or tiles containing the material begin to deteriorate and crumble.

Even if the asbestos isn't contaminating the surrounding area, the view has done enough damage already, Kathy Burt said. School officials and students plan to go back to the city council a third time, early next year, she said, with a stack of the city's monthly updates on the motel.

"I don't know what else to do," she said. "It affects us. We do have parents who come to check out the school and they just drive on. It's a great school, but they don't want to be around that. No one wants to."

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