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Gray to county: Pay for study

New mayor wants commissioners to drop objections to project.

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - New Lancaster City Mayor Rick Gray played a game of high-stakes poker this morning at the Lancaster County Commissioners' weekly meeting. If two Lancaster County commissioners want a new feasibility study of the proposed downtown convention center/hotel project, he said, they should order one and pay for it.

And, if the study should reflect positively on the proposed project, commissioners Dick Shellenberger and Molly Henderson should drop their lawsuits and remove any obstacles to construction.

If the study should show the project will not be feasible, Gray said he would end his support for the \$137 million downtown revitalization initiative.

"I would welcome the opportunity to talk to commissioners about other uses for that building," Gray said.

The two commissioners didn't immediately take Gray's offer.

Convention Center Authority executive director David Hixson said he would be willing to take the study proposal to his board, but Penn Square General Corp. president Nevin Cooley said the partnership he represents would not be willing to take part in another study.

Gray said he wouldn't be making the bet without a strong hand. He is confident the results will be positive.

"I think it's not only feasible, I think it's a project that we should be doing," said Gray, who took office last week.

Gray said he made the gesture in an attempt to repair the rift between the city and county over the project.

"I believe it is time for the community to move forward and end the ongoing debate," said Gray.

Shellenberger and Henderson played close to the vest.

Henderson, who last week called for a feasibility study to be done, said only: "I believe it is time to look at this and make a decision about where we go with this project."

Shellenberger said he would think about it.

"I'm a little old fashioned. I need to sleep on this," the commissioner chairman said.

The commissioners later told Gray that he could expect a response from them by the end of this week.

The commissioners can do a study, but there is no guarantee the two principal parties in the project — the county Convention Center Authority and the private sector Penn Square Partners — will participate.

Hixson said he understands Gray's position and would be willing to take the study proposal to his board.

"As a community leader, I think what he is urging everyone to do is step up and work together to get this done and I certainly support his efforts," said Hixson.

"I think the bottom line is that we need to put all the negativity behind us and break the log jam for this project and get the community behind it."

But Cooley, of Penn Square General Corp., the lead partner of the private partnership, said such a study would be unnecessary and far too late.

"A feasibility study is done when deciding if the project should be done. We were at that point years ago. Not now, as you are about to begin demolition," Cooley said.

He compared it to a couple deciding to have children. "You don't reask that question on the way to the delivery room," he said.

As part of his proposal to the commissioners, Gray included several conditions:

middot; The county should immediately retain PriceWaterhouseCoopers to do the study.

middot; It should be completed within 60 days, so as not to impede the project's progress.

middot; It should be paid for by the county, because Gray believes it is unnecessary.

middot; If the study finds the project is feasible, the commissioners must agree to support the project and withdraw all legal challenges and remove all obstacles to development.

middot; If it is not found to be feasible, the city will work with the county to develop the Watt & Shand site "in a manner that benefits the city and the county."

"It's on you folks. If you want it, get it done and get it done timely," Gray told Shellenberger and Henderson.

The third commissioner, Pete Shaub, supports the project.

The proposal comes as the project officials announced today that they have received bids for the demolition and stabilization of the Watt & Shand building facade.

It will cost about \$2.9 million to stabilize the building facade and \$1.6 million to demolish the remaining structure, Hixson said.

Those bids are slightly under budget.

Cooley said he was pleased the numbers came in low, and he hopes