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Interfaith Community Council deal to move to Brown Starks building in New Albany finalized

Nonprofit will have twice the space available for community services

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NEW ALBANY — Interfaith Community Council will have about double the space to operate in after the agency closed on a deal Monday to rent the Brown Starks Neighborhood Center building in New Albany.

The New Albany Housing Authority has agreed to a 30-year lease with Interfaith that will make the nonprofit organization the primary tenant of the Brown Starks building, which is located at 1200 Bono Road.

“Obviously we’re really excited about it, we see a lot of potential for how we can develop and hopefully how we can be a better service to the community,” said Interfaith Executive Director Christine Harbeson.

Interfaith launched in 1964 as the Downtown Neighborhood Council, and has provided several services including a food pantry and after-school activities for children.

The organization is planning to revamp Brown Starks to include private and public meeting areas, as Interfaith is undergoing a fundraising drive for the upgrades in hopes of having \$450,000 pledged by the end of the year.

Interfaith began its drive to move to the Brown Starks building due to a lack of space at its 702 E. Market St. location.

History of Brown Starks

Several agencies held stake in Brown Starks which made for a lengthy process in order to clear the property so Interfaith could sign a lease agreement.

In 1997, the New Albany Redevelopment Commission joined the Neighborhood Public Service Center Development Corp., which also consisted of Rauch Inc., the New Albany-Floyd County Consolidated School Corp., the housing authority and Interfaith.

The goal of the agency was to build up to five neighborhood community centers in Floyd County, and the first was Brown Starks. The redevelopment commission matched the total contribution of the three other entities and funded \$360,000 for Brown Starks to be constructed.

The housing authority provided the land for the center, and signed a 50-year lease with the city and the community center development agency over the building.

But the agency had trouble keeping tenants in the center, sparked in part by a downturn in the economy according to officials. Last December, the agency approached the commission with a new strategy so Interfaith could enter into a 30-year lease and provide a consistent tenant for Brown Starks.

But the move required the redevelopment commission to forgo its interests in Brown Starks so the housing authority could receive help from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD.

The commission agreed last week to cede its stake in the building, which allowed HUD and the housing authority to enter into a Declaration of Trust with the federal entity.

Basically the housing authority has a 20-year lease with HUD, which will make Brown Starks eligible for federal aid for maintenance expenses over the next two decades.

“Without that Declaration of Trust, you can’t spend federal dollars on non federal facilities as it applies to the housing authority,” said Bob Lane, executive director of the New Albany Housing Authority.

He added the deal with HUD could not have happened if the city maintained its interests in the center.

City Attorney Shane Gibson said while the redevelopment commission might not retain finances for its investment, allowing the deal between the housing authority, HUD and Interfaith to materialize will mean community services can continue at Brown Starks.

He said that was the original intent of the redevelopment commission and city when it agreed to pay \$360,000 toward Brown Starks.

The next step

Lane said Monday marked a great day for the community.

“It’s going to be a seamless transition from this neighborhood service center of the past to a neighborhood service center of the future,” he said.

Harbeson anticipated the renovation of the building will take about eight weeks, but added she doesn’t know exactly when Interfaith will move to Brown Starks because several state and federal requirements must be met before the transition is completed.

But when the time comes to open, Harbeson said Interfaith will have about double the space it currently has and will also be benefited by a large parking lot.

The move will further opportunities for Interfaith to partner with various community organizations, she said. The organization is hopeful to one day open an adult education wing.

“This community has been very generous for the last almost 50 years,” Harbeson said. “I just feel like they know we’re needed and we facilitate their gifts the best that we can.”

For more information on Interfaith, visit the website www.interfaithinc.org.