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Former 1880s saloon OK'd for low-income housing

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A Noblesville-based nonprofit plans to convert a more-than-century-old building that is part of the old southside into low-income apartments.

The City Council approved the project Tuesday.

Sage Hales, director of the nonprofit Hamilton County Area Neighborhood Development (HAND), expects work to start late this summer on the building at 304 S. Eighth St. The first tenants could move in by mid 2011.

Even in Hamilton County, Hales said people are living at or near the poverty line.

"We are seeing a big need," she said.

The project will include five 1-2 person apartments. To qualify, people must make 50 percent or less of the area's median income. Currently, that's \$23,850 for one person or \$27,250 for two.

Planning for the project began early last year. The Noblesville Housing Authority, an organization that partners with HAND, purchased the circa-1870 building in a tax sale in 2009.

Hales said the historical nature of the building would be preserved, including the storefront-style entrance. The building was a saloon at least as early as 1887, according to research by Nancy Massey at the Hamilton East Public Library. It's been a restaurant or tavern throughout most of its history, though more recently it has been used for apartments. It's vacant now.

Hales expects the project to cost up to \$585,000 and said the county has federal money through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program.

HAND was founded in response to a 2002 assessment identifying a need for affordable housing for working families, seniors and those with disabilities in the county.

HAND finished two senior housing projects in 2009, consisting of the 25-unit \$3.8 million Spicewood Gardens in Sheridan and the six-unit \$785,000 Plum Tree Gardens in Noblesville. The latter also is a part of Noblesville's old southside. Three apartments are still available in Sheridan.

HAND and the housing authority are eying the circa 1903-05 building at 347 S. Eighth St., but Hales is less hopeful they will buy it. The roof is partially caved in, and the Noblesville Planning Department has boarded up windows and will require any new owner to shore up the building. It could need hundreds of thousands of dollars of work.

Still, HAND in 2009 completed a \$1,800 study with a grant from Historic Landmarks Foundation that showed the building -- which also has been available in tax sales -- could be saved.

The building was erected from 1903 to 1905, according to county historian David Heighway, and was a bottling works company as early as 1905. Heighway said David M. Roper, a black business owner, opened a barbershop there in 1920 and later turned it into a grocery store. Heighway said the

structure is historically significant, noting that the old southside was home to a large black community.

Additional Facts

Helping HAND

The Hamilton County Area Neighborhood Development nonprofit has programs that provide helping hand. Contact HAND, 320 Kings Lane, Noblesville, at (317) 773-5110.

HAND is taking applications for low income and senior housing.

The nonprofit also is providing funds up to \$30,000 for down payment assistance on the purchase of foreclosed homes. Some properties in Carmel, Fishers, Noblesville and Westfield qualify. The program is for families making \$81,720 or less, which is 120 percent of the area's median income.
