



February 28, 2008

City plans to jazz up historic McCollum Hall

Will buy, renovate club that hosted legends

By Christina Cepero
ccepero@news-press.com

McCollum Hall will survive for another day.

The city of Fort Myers has agreed to pay \$382,500 for the historic building that sits at Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard and Cranford Avenue east of downtown.

The Community Redevelopment Agency will look for a nonprofit developer to renovate it and turn it back into a venue for entertainment, dining and shopping.

The former dance hall drew whites and blacks together to listen to famous black musicians such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington, B.B. King and Louis Armstrong, in the segregated 1940s, '50s and '60s.

The historic building was constructed in 1938 but has been in disrepair since the 1970s.

The McCollum family, who could not afford to maintain the hall, will receive \$330,000, half of it upfront and the rest over two years. The remaining \$52,500 will go to pay back taxes and code enforcement liens.

The family had the property appraised at \$660,000. The city's appraisal was \$600,000.

"Because the city felt the building needed a lot of work, they reduced it down to about what the real estate was worth," said the family's attorney, Bruce Strayhorn.

The family agreed to take half of its appraised value so the building could be saved, he said.

Cliff McCollum Sr. built the hall 70 years ago. His son, Cliff McCollum Jr., inherited it.

"That was sort of the premier jazz facility between Tampa and Miami," Strayhorn said.

A rope separated blacks and whites, but by the end of the night everyone would dance together. It was the only club in the area black soldiers could legally attend during World War II.

This isn't the first time the city has purchased a historic building.

The city bought and restored the Burroughs Home and Langsford-Kingston House so nonprofits could make them offices. But no group has been able to afford to come in and maintain the properties.

That's why Councilman Warren Wright is skeptical that trying to attract a nonprofit developer will work.

"I think we're attempting to be more proactive and get the right nonprofit in there, and I think if it's carefully selected, maybe we'll have better luck," he said.

"The building is of cultural significance and it needs to be honored," Wright said.

Don Paight, the redevelopment agency's executive director, said it will work to draw potential developers.

The agency's research determined it would cost \$1.5 million to renovate the building.

It would give back some of the taxes it generates each year as an incentive, Paight said.

"We've used this on a number of projects."
