Hotel project’s lack of funds no surprise

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Is there no solid footing in Pine Bluff? The news last week about the long-sought and long-promised hotel was disheartening but perhaps not surprising. We kept hearing the arrangements were to be finalized at the end of March, but that day and month came and went with no news from city leaders. Then Joseph Mccorvey, head of the Convention Center, which will be (or would have been) attached to the new hotel, said the financing was short by $1.4 million and that he had until September to find it. That’s when a guarantee for the project from the U.S. Department of Agriculture expires.

This is a project that has been discussed and planned for multiple years now, with feasibility studies on whether to renovate the 1980s-vintage Wilson World hotel or build something new, and studies on even whether a downtown hotel connected to a convention center that is currently surrounded by not much would be successful.

Is the lack of $1.4 million a hiccup? Mccorvey says the project’s cost has risen that much since the numbers were crunched two years ago. Or is it the first sounds of a $25 million project that is about to crash into the rear-view mirror?

Mccorvey said he was reluctant to ask the city for more money considering the circumstances. Recall that the public was told no tax dollars would be used for the project, and then the city promptly raided Urban Renewal’s bank account for $2.9 million in tax dollars for the project.

Council Member Glen Brown Sr. may have said it best back in February 2023 when the money was filched from Urban Renewal: “I thought ‘OK, let someone else take the risk,’” he said. “So what is this $3 million? I guess you can just tell me a lie.” The whole affair reminded us of all the ways in which Pine Bluff residents have either been lied to or supremely let down. There were those apartments downtown. There was even a groundbreaking event held for them. But as soon as the Go Forward Pine Bluff-sponsored tax vote failed, those folks packed their bags and left. They needed tax dollars to make their project happen? It’s unclear.

Opportunity House was going to be a homeless shelter. Now it’s a barely-there day room. And the only way it’s going to be what was promised is if hundreds of thousands of dollars are raised. That leaves the city with zero shelters now that the Salvation Army has closed its overnight facility.

The vaunted go-kart track — the one that just had to be built on the site of an old motel, which took scads of money to demolish — was supposed to be ready to roll last fall. Then the opening was moved to spring. By our calendar, spring is wrapping up in about three weeks and the area where the track is supposed to go still looks like a dusty moonscape.

And those downtown buildings? They're still vacant, despite the millions of tax dollars put into buying them and stabilizing a few. We even found a post on social media from Go Forward CEO Ryan Watley: "PSA! It's happening, pay close attention. Soon these buildings will be filled with restaurants and retail." That was in July 2021. Pardon us if our attention has wandered in the intervening three years.

Even Go Forward's plaza at Sixth and Main is having problems. The legal arrangement with Simmons Bank over its donation of the property and $2 million for the project was approved by Urban Renewal, but now that that entity is likely going away, the city council needs to approve the arrangement as well. But those folks are having a bit of heartburn over the particulars. And the $2 million is needed to finish the project.

And a city housing project for low- to moderate-income people on the site of the old Southeast Middle School property is now going to be an apartment complex because the land is susceptible to flooding and filling it in is too expensive. Could the project have gone somewhere that wasn't prone to flooding, which would have allowed some of the school property to be saved for posterity as proposed by many citizens? Too late for that. The school buildings are now dust.

Even private citizens get in on the act. There was the guy who, working with Urban Renewal, was going to put a fancy multi-screen theater complex into the old Walmart building at the dead mall. He vanished.

And more recently, there was the Pine Bluff fellow who made a big splash about taking that dead mall and bringing it back to life. Again — not so much.

From the outside looking in, Pine Bluff loses points for the crime, particularly the murder rate, which usually places the city as one of the most dangerous in the country. But from the perspective of those living here, it's the hollow promises from city leadership of prosperity being just around the corner that have intensified the negative perceptions and led to the metro area being one of the fastest-shrinking in the country.

Is it any wonder (that) the jaded public has an attitude of throw the bums out? Is it any wonder that Mayor Shirley Washington and Go Forward have been kicked to the curb? Elected and anointed leaders have to look no further than the mirror to understand why people's trust has eroded.

We keep looking for the firm footing in this city, but it seems that all we find is quicksand.