

# Parking deck may signal rebirth for Pontiac

Saving Phoenix Center structure could aid development of downtown

By Bill Laitner  
 Detroit Free Press

For years, Pontiac has forged a legal and public battle to tear down its big Phoenix Center parking structure, smack in the city center, claiming the cost was too much for the economically-downtrodden city.

On the horizon, though, is a possible reversal of the demolition order, an about-face that regional planners say could be a sign of a long-awaited rebirth for downtown Pontiac.

Three years ago, Pontiac's former emergency manager issued the demolition order. The city's big deck, built in the 1970s, had swelling maintenance costs that Pontiac couldn't afford, emergency

manager Lou Schimmel said. He was seconded by Oakland County officials, who'd been monitoring Pontiac's fiscal troubles.

But no one saw what was coming — a series of losing court fights with an office complex that depends on the Phoenix Center deck for its hundreds of employees. That ran up another kind of cost: mounting attorney fees. As of October, the total was more than \$595,000, Pontiac City Administrator Joe Sobota said.

With the litigation stuck in the Michigan Court of Appeals, legal jousting could go on for years, said Michelle Harrell, attorney for the Ottawa Towers office complex, which sued Pontiac in 2013 to block the demolition. Until re-

cently, both sides seemed dug in for an endless siege.

Yet, in the last three years, as Oakland County saw the Great Recession fading fast, Pontiac's fiscal status started reversing decades of deficits. Pontiac this year expects to enjoy a \$10.8-million surplus in its general fund, Mayor Deidre Waterman said. Thanks to that surplus, Waterman this month hired Berkley's city manager as Pontiac's new deputy mayor.

The surplus is allowing new dreams to take shape for revitalizing the city's long-moribund downtown. They include a reconfiguring of the ill-advised Woodward Avenue loop around the downtown.

After years of inaction, regional planners this month en-



JESSICA J. TREVIN/Detroit Free Press  
 Mike Stephens, facility manager and partner in Ottawa Towers in Pontiac, stands on the stage of the Phoenix Center amphitheater.

dorsed un-doing the loop, so that motorists cruise through the downtown, not speed past it, Waterman said. In addition, an old theater shows signs of

reopening, and a restaurateur with deep pockets seems intent on opening a barbecue joint, she said.  
 Downtown Pontiac's warm-

ing prospects, coupled with the city's rising attorney fees for the Phoenix Center, had Waterman repeating her long-held view — the parking deck should stay. But if a major departure, former emergency manager Schimmel said he'd go along with that.

"I have said discreetly to all parties, including the mayor, that any solution they come up with to end this litigation, I would favor," Schimmel said Friday. His view remains crucial because Schimmel still oversees Pontiac's finances from his role, appointed by Gov. Rick Snyder, on Pontiac's Transition Advisory Board. He signaled that, at last, he would defer to Waterman on the Phoenix Center.

"I'd like to see the mayor settle this," said Schimmel.

See PHOENIX, Page 5A

FROM PAGE 4A

Ironically, it's Schimmel who's largely credited with ending the city's fiscal woes, through sweeping layoffs, privatizing and budget balancing, bringing on the very conditions that seem to justify keeping the Phoenix Center.

The sprawling deck has 2,800 parking spaces on three stories, topped by a vast rooftop amphitheater that holds 3,000 fixed seats plus space for 3,000 lawn chairs. The rooftop concert site once drew not just Pontiac residents but music fans from across the county, said Mike Stephens, a partner with his father Chuck Stephens and other investors in the Ottawa Towers office complex.

"They've had Aretha Franklin, the Beastie Boys, a lot of R&B artists, and people continue to say they have fond memories of coming here," Stephens said. "We'd like to see that come back," he said.

That would be by night. By day, saving the structure would let Stephens fill the twin Ottawa Towers with new office tenants, bringing as many as 2,000 more workers to the downtown, "to buy lunch and gasoline and who knows what else," said Blair McGowan, owner of the Crofoot Banquet Hall and nightclub, a block north of the Phoenix Center.

After Schimmel ordered the deck razed, the city closed it in August 2012. Crofoot customers soon complained, said McGowan, who besides running his Pontiac business is a partner in restoring Detroit's Masonic Temple. When the Crofoot holds a concert, "peo-



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ple only have so much patience — they want to park nearby and come right inside in their club clothing, but the surface lots fill up, and then they can't find a place and they just leave the city," he said.

A decision to keep the big

deck would show that Pontiac has learned what others know across metro Detroit, in myriad downtowns and shopping spots: Parking drives development. New decks are going up in Mt. Clemens and Rochester. Other towns including Fern-

dale are mulling whether to build them.

In auto-centric southeast Michigan, a region largely bereft of mass transit, not much happens without access to abundant parking for consumers as well as employees, said

Deputy Macomb County Executive John Paul Rea.

"As Pontiac fills their storefronts, there's probably going to be a need again for that parking capacity," said Rea. He spent eight years in Macomb County's planning de-

partment, pushing development in widely scattered shopping districts.

"In Macomb County, we've got a \$65-million capital improvement program under way, and a big part of that is building a three-story structure next to our (county administration) building in Mt. Clemens, not just for people to utilize our county services but also to engage the downtown's needs," he said.

Parking decks are ideal for driving the intense, multistory urban developments of the future, said Mark Nickita, an urban-planning architect and an elected Birmingham city commissioner.

Nickita is familiar with the Phoenix Center deck; his firm once studied Pontiac's downtown for would-be developers. In the resulting plan, "we kept the deck and effectively skinned it with a new exterior," he said.

Decades ago, Birmingham's leaders went on a deck-building spree, erecting five parking decks on the perimeter of the downtown, Nickita said. The approach fueled so much development that Birmingham's leaders are back at it, discussing whether to add a sixth parking structure and add additional floors to an existing deck.

"Parking decks have been a huge contributor to the success of our downtown," Nickita said.

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