

City of Dallas buys car repair shop site at key Oak Cliff intersection

By ROY APPLETON

Staff Writer

rappleton@dallasnews.com

Published: 23 May 2013 10:55 PM

Updated: 23 May 2013 10:55 PM

Roy Smith was off on a murmuring ramble.

Talk of V-6 engines led to V-8s and transmissions and speed and somehow shaved heads. Three guys standing in an open bay door chimed in now and then, occasionally erupting in wild laughter.

Before long, such carrying on won't be part of the daily flow near Davis Street and Zang Boulevard.

Roy's Transmission and Auto Care will be gone.

The City Council agreed Wednesday to pay Smith \$370,368 for his property at 138 W. Davis St., clearing the way for change near a major intersection in north Oak Cliff.

In time, Smith said, he will look for another place to work. And the city will have a prime place to work with.

His break over, his audience scattered, Smith rose Tuesday from his seat near a hood-up 1996 Chevrolet Impala, telling how it's in for a rebuilt Cadillac Escalade engine. Outside his shop, near his old brown and tan wrecker, he fielded a question: Was he satisfied with the pending sale?

"Not really, but it's better than nothing," he said. "They could have taken it if they wanted it."

In August 2011, Smith's son, the listed owner of the property, received a letter from the city informing him that unspecified "improvements to West Davis Street" had "progressed to the point that we wish to advise you that your property ... will be needed for the project."

The city never exercised its power of eminent domain. It also didn't get its initial purchase offer, while Roy Smith received far from his dream price.

He bought a gas station at the site through a foreclosure sale in 1994 and moved his transmission and engine repair business there. Before receiving the city's leverage letter, he had listed the 10,260-square-foot property for \$775,000.

The city last year offered him \$205,000, after deducting environmental cleanup and demolition costs. He and real estate broker Richard Patten challenged the figures. Negotiations yielded an agreement.

Smith has 90 days to vacate the property. He said he will get his shoulders repaired and knees replaced before setting up shop again. He would like to help former convicts develop job skills to stay out of prison.

“They come by here looking for anything to do,” said Smith, 65. “I’ve got a lot of knowledge I could share.”

Looking to create a welcoming entryway to the Bishop Arts District, City Council member Delia Jasso targeted Smith’s property as the place to make that happen, an eyesore in the way.

She secured funding through the city’s Neighborhood Investment Program. It uses federal dollars for public improvements, housing and other community redevelopment projects in low-income areas. And with her lead, the council in 2011 amended the boundaries of a program area in north Oak Cliff to include Smith’s property.

The city’s Housing Department has allocated \$1.5 million in neighborhood investment dollars to pay for the purchase, cleanup and improvements in a project that has changed with time. An early plan included a covered area for vendors, a playground, benches and lighting, plus a stage on nearby city property.

Cost concerns scaled that vision back. Now the likely extension of the downtown-Oak Cliff streetcar line is dominating the planning.

“It presents a new opportunity,” said Cobbie Ransom, a city neighborhood development manager.

For now, the city plans to demolish the repair shop, remediate the site and turn it over to the streetcar project.

Some of the housing department’s \$1.5 million will pay for that work and for improvements along nearby Seventh Street leading to the Bishop Arts District, Ransom said. Streetscaping and increased parking are among the proposed changes, he said.

The neighborhood investment area’s boundaries would have to be changed again to allow such funding, he said. The action is appropriate, Ransom said, because the area lies in a census tract with incomes that qualify for such support.

Bishop Arts property owners David Spence and Joe McElroy say they would like to preserve if possible the original 1948 gas station structure on Smith’s former property.

That idea hasn’t been ruled out, said Keith Manoy, assistant director of public works. But the building may not be suitable and funding is uncertain, he said, as is the routing of the streetcar line expected to arrive at Zang and Davis by mid-2015.

Whatever happens, Manoy said, the entryway “needs to be as nice as it can be.”

That was Jasso’s goal early on. When told in January that Smith had agreed to accept the city’s offer, she responded: “I understand Mr. Smith is a kind and generous person. I’m just glad we could work with him.”