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Future of NorthWestern Energy building ignites controversy

By Robin Jordan

Butte-Silver Bow commissioners last week placed one developer's proposal for redevelopment of the old NorthWestern Energy building on hold and denied a request from a Helena man to give a presentation on an alternative plan for the building.

Karen Byrnes, the county's community development director, had requested the council authorize Chief Executive Dave Palmer to sign an option agreement with Wishrock Housing Partners LLC for marketing and redevelopment of the building at 40 E. Broadway. Under the agreement, Wishrock would market the building to prospective tenants for one year and pay half the utility and maintenance costs. If enough tenants commit to buying or leasing space, Wishrock could buy the building from the county for \$1.

Before last week's meeting of the council of commissioners, however, Wishrock asked that its proposal be tabled after a local newspaper reported that Eric Fulton, co-founder of a Helena internet services business, planned to present an alternative proposal that includes investing up to \$500,000 in renovation of the building while seeking tenants. Wishrock released a statement that it would step aside if the county considered another alternative a better option for redevelopment of the building.

Butte-Silver Bow took ownership of the former NorthWestern Energy building in August 2016 as part of its agreement with the company to build its new headquarters at the corner of Park and Main Streets. Last April, the county hired a professional marketing firm, NAI Business Properties, to produce and distribute a professional request for proposals and market the property nationally. The request for proposals was released last June and its 90-day deadline was later extended to Dec. 8, 2017.

County officials received two proposals by the Dec. 8 deadline, one from Wishrock and a second from a local man, Cameron Moylan, but



The future of the old NorthWestern Energy headquarters building at 40 E. Broadway was a subject of contention at last week's council of commissioners meeting. Last year, maintenance and security cost the county \$70,000. *Photo by Robin Jordan*

questioned whether Moylan had the financial resources for such a large project. Wishrock, a national development firm which has offices in Portland, Maine, Missoula and three other cities, is primarily in the business of creating and preserving affordable housing, but also has experience in renovating and redeveloping large historic buildings, including the Wilma building in Missoula.

The council voted to hold the Wishrock proposal in its committee of the whole for further discussion.

Even though Fulton had not submitted a proposal by the Dec. 8 deadline, Commissioner Bill Andersen had submitted a formal request that

Fulton be allowed to make a presentation on his plan to the council on Feb. 14.

Commissioner Brendan McDonough said he was "disappointed" that Andersen would try to circumvent the agreed-upon proposal procedure and that he had criticized Wishrock's proposal in the media before the council met to discuss it.

Andersen said he did not like Wishrock's proposal. He said the company's main focus is affordable housing and that uptown Butte needs more businesses, not low-income housing.

Byrnes said Wishrock was planning to market the building for multiple uses, as the county

Continued on page 2...

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