

City approves sale of Depot District property

By Sharon Myers / The Dispatch

Posted Feb 25, 2019 at 9:45 PM

The Lexington City Council unanimously voted during its regular meeting on Monday to sell a two-acre piece of property in the Depot District that is proposed to be developed into an agriculture innovation center.

Following a public hearing, council members approved a resolution to sell the property located between South Salisbury and South Railroad streets and East Fifth and East Fourth streets to William Fusselbough of Southern Cross Management for \$30,000.

The property was formerly the showroom at Lexington Home Brands and has been vacant since it was purchased by the City of Lexington in 2007 along with other properties in the area.

Tammy Absher, director of the Lexington Business and Community Development, said the facility will be for the research and production of plant-based oils and other materials, including industrial hemp.

“The use itself is for a facility that researches the different method for growing plants and different kinds of herbs, including hemp,” Absher said. “It is part of a pilot program adopted by the state and now the federal government that allows the research in the use of methods to grow and gather different essential oils.”

Absher said the research facility will be partnering with North Carolina State University as part of the statewide industrial hemp pilot program, which requires strict regulation and supervision. She said there will also be partnerships with local hemp producers.

“You go through a pretty rigorous process and they check the crops on a regular basis to make sure the THC levels are not exceeding the very minute percent; they are very closely regulated,” Absher said. “In order to have a production facility, you have to have a relationship with a farmer as well as with a

university.”

According to the North Carolina State Extension website, state legislators approved an industrial hemp pilot program in 2016. Under the rules for the program, a farmer wishing to grow industrial hemp must apply to the Industrial Hemp Commission and receive a license.

By law, industrial hemp must have less than .3 percent tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC. THC is the chemical that produces the euphoric effect of other cannabis plants.

Lexington resident Chris Allred spoke during the public hearing urging the city council, as part of the sales agreement, to take steps to preserve a historic piece of the property that was once the Mountcastle Knitting Mill, which operated in the early 1900s.

“It dates back to when George Mountcastle came to Lexington in the late 1800s,” Allred said. “He partnered with (local families) to create a mill in the early 1900s... I encourage the council to work as diligently as possible to maintain that building. It is actually the third oldest knitting mill in Lexington. It is an extremely historic property.”

Absher said the buyers are committed to historically renovating the property, if possible.

According to preliminary planning documents, the agricultural research center will also include demonstration rooms open to the public and include educational activities for school children. It will also involve university-based projects, which will be integrated with local community colleges, state universities, private universities and other educational institutions.

Also during the meeting after a public hearing, the city council approved a resolution to amend the local historical district design guide to increase the height regulation for fencing to four feet.

According to Lexington City Planner Trey Cleaton, after several requests from the public, city staff researched fences in the Park Place Historical District and found that several existing fences are currently four feet in overall height, many of which were placed before the historic district designation in 2013. Cleaton

also said that common dimensions for fencing materials is four feet in height, and a requirement of three-and-a-half feet created undue expense for homeowners.

Also during the meeting, Lexington Police Chief Mark Sink received approval from city council to accept a \$1,000 donation from Uptown Lexington for placing third in the 2018 Uptown Lexington Christmas Window Contests. The funds will be used for programs designed to serve and mentor community youth.

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