

Crisfield council OKs sale of landmark Carvel Hall

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(Photo: Deborah Gates Photo)

The City of Crisfield is close to unloading a nuisance landmark that was celebrated for years of jobs and prosperity, and blamed for an environmental mess and longtime marketing nightmare.

Spangler Strategic Advisors LLC, an early-stage investment and consulting firm in Annapolis, wants to buy and develop the former Carvel Hall cutlery property, a cavernous sprawl on top of contaminated ground — surface water and soil.

What better use for the site's 23.35-acre outdoor space than processing manure, said members of the Crisfield City Council before voting unanimously to accept Spangler's proposal. Inside the 70,000 square-foot space would be several firms suitable for the industrial zoning with jobs for dozens of residents.

Some residents at the council's Wednesday, March 23, meeting cautioned of potentially adverse consequences.

Problems at the property — contaminated from chromium waste and elevated levels of metals in the soil — could get worse, some said. Also, manure-processing on the north end of town could ruin tourism against a backdrop of a southern waterfront of condominiums, shops and an events centerpiece at the City Dock.

The cutlery had been around since the 1930s, and closed after a half-century. In 2007, the city acquired the business's 23.35-acre property. The idea was to revive the site as an economic contributor. It instead became a frustration, an empty shell frowned on by environmentalists. It has been declared a brownfield, a property with limited development options because of stubborn contamination.

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"How far down do we have to go before we crash," Mayor Kimberly Lawson said, quoting City Manager Rick Pollitt about a lack of industry and employment opportunities. "The city needs jobs."

Spangler plans to invest \$1.5 million in an environmental assessment of the property and is in talks with the Maryland Department of the Environment, said Thomas Spangler, the firm's chief executive.

He unveiled a proposal that would create a manure-to-fertilizer operation on 15 of 23 outdoor acres. Examples of indoor uses would range from engineering to landscaping firms, each creating up to 10 full-time, and up to 15 part-time jobs.

"There would be significant job creation," Spangler said. "On the low end, they would generate \$5 million in revenue. We are not asking for tax incentives, nor do we expect tenants to. We want to create lasting businesses and make the property more environmentally safe."

Critics say problems could undermine potential benefits.

"If the wrong thing goes in there, it would be detrimental to the citizens and properties in the surrounding area," said Ladell Dorman, who told the council he spoke for local business owners. "The business community supports you, but I tell you what is not acceptable — unexpected consequences."

Dorman reminded the audience of a comment from then Gov. William Donald Schaefer, who in 1991 compared the Eastern Shore to an outhouse referring to the rural landscape of outdoor bathrooms in the poultry producing region. The comment drew sharp criticism and the governor's eventual apology.

"Manure processing could kill strategic revitalization of the city," Dorman said. "That could be an unintended consequence."

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Spangler cited added investments, such as training and on-the-job student benefits for area schools including Wor-Wic Community College and the J.M. Tawes Career & Technology Center that is in the midst of rebuilding.

"This would be a catalyst for additional investments," he said. "The county is building a new vo-tech school. You don't have to move across the bridge to find a quality job."

Spangler's firm was the only one that responded to the city's request for proposals to acquire and develop the property. Lawson reminded the audience that the firm stepped up to the challenge, although "the government won't give us clearance on this property," because of stubborn contaminations.

"The property needs to be cleaned up," Lawson said.

Development is pending an environment study, a sales agreement with the city and final approvals, Spangler said.

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