

Take an old building, add imagination

The large building across from the City's swimming pool has seen countless visitors over the years – some of them parishioners coming to worship, others prostitutes applying for permits to work in the city's brothels.

We don't know what possible third incarnation the former Mormon church and police station might take if it is sold to a private buyer, but we applaud the Elko City Council for putting demolition plans on hold to consider the possibility of ... whatever.

Engineering firm owner and city planning commissioner Aaron Martinez expressed interest in purchasing the moldy building last week at a city council meeting. Council members narrowly voted in his favor, with Robert Schmittlein, Mandy Simons and John Patrick Rice deciding to table a pre-demolition asbestos removal contract, outnumbering councilman Reece Keener and Mayor Chris Johnson.

Martinez said he would run his engineering firm out of the building initially, while his long-term plans include something "that would benefit the City's existing facilities."

Opposition to demolishing the building was first brought up by architect Catherine Wines in a commentary published in the Free Press. She cited its historical value and the fact that remodeling is cheaper than new construction, even when a building is not in good shape:

"I have toured the old police station, including a climb to the attic. It's a well built, masonry building on a good foundation with some internal, non-structural issues. With a solid structure, all other building issues can be overcome for less than the expense of building new," she wrote.

Wines also pointed out that Elko has benefitted from other repurposed buildings, such as the Igloo recreation center (once a cold-storage warehouse), the Chamber of Commerce (once a ranch complex), the Charter School (formerly a hardware store), and the Western Folklife Center (the former Pioneer Hotel).

From a financial aspect the City would be better off selling than proceeding with demolition, providing that the building can pass inspection. It is located in a buffer zone between a residential area and the city's primary parks and recreation district, so if it is sold, the land would have to be rezoned from its current public designation.

Besides Martinez, Rice said other potential buyers have expressed interest in the building. He was reasonably disturbed by the fact that they would not reveal what their plans were, but that's the difference between public and private ownership. Once a building is in private hands it can be used for any purpose the owner wants, providing it meets zoning restrictions.

We don't know if a suitable use could be found for it, but like the slim majority of council members we are willing to entertain suggestions. It would be a shame to see the lot go the same way as Elko General Hospital a few blocks away, which was replaced with a parking lot.

In urging the City not to destroy the building, Wines wrote:

"Careful consideration would need to be given to what might occupy that building in the future, being so close to the park and other important civic areas. We are a smart, intuitive people, let's forget about the Las Vegas style destruction and let the third act of the old police station unfold."

At this point there certainly isn't any rush to decide. The City took eight years to figure out where it was going to build a new police station, and the old one does not present any hazards while it stands vacant. A little imagination and a lot of private investment are what Elko needs to build its future on.