

Azusa store owner balks at selling property to city

By Daniel Tedford, Staff Writer

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The city of Azusa has purchased the land around the Furniture Station on the northeast corner of Arrow Highway and Azusa Avenue and is asking the business owner to sell his property pictured Dec. 2, 2008. (Leo Jarzomb SGVN/Staff)

AZUSA - Roy Fowler's Furniture Station has been sitting at the corner of Arrow Highway and Azusa Avenue for about 36 years.

It's a small L-shaped shop, surrounded by vacant land. Across the street are Covina's AMC Theaters and Outback Restaurant. Fowler's plan is simple: stay in business and when the time is right, pass it on to his son.

But lately, that plan has become more complicated. Azusa city officials have threatened Fowler with eminent domain in an effort to

purchase his property, which is adjacent to the once controversial Corky's Corner.

Fowler's land is on the corner where the city of Azusa begins on Azusa Avenue, about a mile from his other Furniture Station on the corner of Arrow Highway and Citrus Avenue in Covina. The city has bought all the land around Fowler's store, including Corky's Corner, and now has its eyes on his piece of property.

In an effort to deter the city's plans, Fowler has a petition at the store asking patrons to take a stand against eminent domain.

"I have enough money for myself, but I promised my son when he was 9years old (he would take over the store) and that is one promise I would like to keep," Fowler said. "He wants to run the business."

Azusa has a developer ready and has a plan for the area comparable to what Covina has across the street. The three main elements of the plan are a small grocery store, a drug store and a restaurant; the latter going right where the Furniture Station is now.

"It is the entrance to our city and it has been an area, with the exception of the Furniture Station, that has been a significant code enforcement problem for the city," said Azusa City Manager Fran Delach. "It has been blighted."

Azusa's plans with the developer are contingent on the Furniture Station selling its property to the city.

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But Fowler isn't keen on the city's plans. Despite business being "terrible," Fowler's priority is to keep the business rather than sell it. The city offered him \$1.1 million for the property based on land value assessed by the city.

Fowler has asked for \$3.3 million in a goodwill offer, based on a land value appraisal of his own at \$1.5 million, \$1.5million for the value of his business, and \$300,000 for a few longtime employees.

"They know they have to compensate for this, they just haven't gotten to the point where they are willing to do it yet," Fowler said.

If an appraisal showed the business and property to be worth \$3.3 million, the city would be interested, Delach said. But in order to make a deal the city would need to appraise the business value and take a look at Fowler's books, which he has not allowed.

Instead, Fowler intends to take the matter to court. The city agrees.

Since Fowler has rejected Azusa's offers and has declined a city appraisal of his business, Azusa has served him notice that the City Council will determine whether or not to pursue eminent domain by no later than Dec. 15, Delach said.

"We are going to take it to court and let them decide if we have to sell that corner or not," Fowler said.

The city is still open to negotiations and will be

even after a decision is made on eminent domain, Delach said. Azusa would rather resolve the issue without going before a judge, he said.

If developed, the city hopes to bring in a national chain restaurant to replace the Furniture Station, Delach said.

"Our goal would be to try to come to an amicable conclusion," Delach said.

Fowler said he has already received an offer of \$2 million from an outside developer for the property and turned it down. He believes the city's initial offer was low, but he called that "just business."

In the end, it isn't about the money for Fowler, he said. He doesn't want the case to go to court to procure more money, but in hopes he can keep his business, he said.

"There are cases out there where the little guy actually wins," Fowler said. "We want to continue our lives as we have for the last 36 years."

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