

POLITICAL NOTEBOOK

Howard council looks at proposed property sales

Discussions about four potential county land sales focused more on the sites' past than on their future Monday evening at a Howard County Council work session.

County Executive Allan Kittleman is asking for approval to sell off four pieces of government-owned property in order to raise additional funds for Howard. He made the request in April, but the council put the legislation on hold until the budget for fiscal year 2016 was finished.

The four properties Kittleman wants to sell include three that were purchased just last year during the administration of County Executive Ken Ulman. The Kittleman administration has estimated that selling off the properties would garner about \$4 million.

The Columbia Flier building was bought for \$2.8 million as a headquarters for the Maryland Center for Entrepreneurship, the Howard County Economic Development Authority's business incubator. After an appraisal, county officials discovered it would take nearly three times the purchase price to renovate, a cost Kittleman said was not "fiscally prudent."

The other buildings Kittleman is asking

to sell are the Bickley property, a historic home in Ellicott City's flood-prone West End; the Hurst properties, which used to house an antiques store along Route 1 in North Laurel; and the former Maryland Environmental Services building in Jessup. Monday, Councilman Greg Fox, a Republican from Fulton, criticized the Ulman administration for purchasing the properties without council involvement.

"It was beyond what many of us knew," he said. "It's very concerning."

According to Department of Public Works Director Jim Irvin, the county bought the Bickley property, a historic house on Frederick Road that flooded during Tropical Storm Lee in September 2011, because the \$500,000 asking price was a much cheaper option than building a stormwater retention pond in the area to reduce flooding from a future storm.

When county officials discovered that a retention pond at the interchange of Route 29 and Route 40 would cost between \$8 million and \$10 million to build, "the



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decision was made by the [Ulman] administration that that was not a viable use of money," he said.

Council Chairwoman Mary Kay Sigaty, a Democrat from west Columbia, said she was concerned about the ethics of selling off the Frederick Road property. If it's likely to flood again, she said, "who could we, in good conscience, sell it to?"

But Councilman Jon Weinstein, a Democrat from Ellicott City, said flood mitigation in the historic district has made progress since the 2011 storm. The county has cleared culverts along the Tiber River of debris, and officials are starting to make headway in gaining access to private property for additional work, he said. Working with Weinstein, Kittleman formed a task force focused on Ellicott City flood prevention last month.

"To me, it seems like it's appropriate at this point to let [the house] go," Weinstein said.

The Hurst properties, meanwhile, were bought through an "inappropriate use" of

tax-exempt bonds, according to Finance Director Stan Milesky.

"The information has been shared with me over the past week and a half that we didn't intend to hold this property" for county use, Milesky told the council.

Instead, he said, the county bought the land for the purpose of "assembling the properties for future use outside of government business."

But Councilwoman Jen Terrasa, a Democrat whose district includes North Laurel and who said she was involved in conversations about the Hurst properties at the time, countered that the county bought the land to aid in revitalization along Route 1.

Sigaty noted the Hurst and Flier building properties could be put to public use as the sites of future housing developments.

The Hurst land is next to the Beechcrest mobile home park, which is owned by the Howard County Housing Commission, while the Flier building falls within the New Town zoning district, where there are still more than 2,000 housing units available before a county-imposed cap on development is reached.