

# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Cuyahoga to sink more cash into tower

### Asbestos removal at Ameritrust site to cost up to \$4M

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Joe Guillen

Cuyahoga County commissioners intend to sink even more tax dollars - as much as \$4 million - into the downtown Ameritrust property that they once envisioned as their new headquarters.

And they expect to lose that money.

Commissioners now want to sell the property at East Ninth Street and Euclid Avenue and are asking for \$35 million, or about what they have invested in the project to date.

But they think they need to spend \$3 million to \$4 million more on asbestos removal to make the site desirable to a developer of condos or offices. Recouping the money is unlikely, and Commissioner Jimmy Dimora says that's OK.

"If we could put a \$4 million investment from the county to leverage that project - we'd do that any day of the week," Dimora said last week.

Commissioners will open bids Wednesday for the old Ameritrust Tower, a rotunda, three office buildings and two parking garages.

The county rejected its first offer for the property in February. The bidder - the K&D Group of Willoughby - didn't meet the county's \$35 million minimum, according to a legal opinion by the county prosecutor's office.

K&D Chief Executive Doug Price has said the company will make a proper offer Wednesday. The company wants to build a \$200 million development with offices, retail and condos.

Seven other groups bought bid packages that detail the county's sale conditions, including the Richard E. Jacobs Group and Carnegie Management and Development Corp. of Westlake.

Rustom Khouri, president and chief executive officer of Carnegie Management and Development, said the company has considered razing most of the buildings, including the Ameritrust Tower, to make way for 600,000 square feet of office space.

The company will decide Monday whether to bid.

f the county and a potential buyer reach an agreement, the buyer has six months to secure financing. The buyer can extend the closing date another six months for \$500,000.

A sale would force commissioners to at least postpone their controversial plans for a new administration building. Commissioners bought the property in 2005 for \$22 million to convert the site into new offices.

The Cuyahoga County Republican Party has been especially critical of the project advanced by the county's three Democratic commissioners.

The Ameritrust saga has made regular appearances in the party's newsletter, News from the Pork Barrel Buffet.

"This whole foray of the county playing real estate developer has, at best, tied up a lot of the county's resources that could've gone to better use," county GOP Chairman Rob Frost said Friday.

Commissioner Tim Hagan said the county-office project would be mothballed for a year or two, even if the property doesn't sell. The county budget is tight and commissioners have already begun other projects.

The county just approved \$40 million in contracts to build a juvenile justice center on Cleveland's East Side. The county is also trying to decide where to build a new Medical Mart and convention center.

"We have to be very prudent about all of this," Hagan said.

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