

A Market House solution: Community ownership

By CRAIG SEWELL, For The Capital (Guest Column)

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The greater Annapolis community has a passion for its downtown, and a particular passion for the City Dock Market House.

The longer it stays vacant, the bigger problem it will be for all. The Annapolis Sustainable Business Alliance believes there is a solution. And the solution lies in our community coming together and taking ownership of the Market House.

At this point, it is of no use to assign blame for what has happened. The courts will do that as the lawsuits make their way through the system.

With respect, we are asking those involved at the present time to move aside and allow the community to take control. There is precedent in cities around the country for the following plan.

To that end, we at the ASBA offer the following community-based solution:

"All parties presently involved with the Market House cease using the Market House property as a hostage to a financial remedy. For the good of the community of Annapolis all parties presently involved must quit all claims on the Market House and its property. Any injured parties can continue the lawsuits against each other if they wish to resolution. But the City, the leasee, tenants and any other parties must allow the Market House building and property to be free of entanglements so the remainder of this Plan can be enacted. These parties need to come together to ensure this happens. This will be tough, but the community of Annapolis demands it.

"A nonprofit corporation be formed named the Annapolis Market House Association (AMHA) to be funded entirely by shares sold to individuals in the greater Annapolis community. The money will be used for operating capital, leasehold improvements and site management. The shareholder / community of Annapolis would then own the Market House and be responsible

for its operation. No one individual could own more than 10 shares to ensure no one person or group exercises undue control. The City of Annapolis would lease the Market House and its property to the AMHA. The AMHA would assume all operational tasks, expenses, negotiate all leases, etc.

"The AMHA would be governed by an elected Board of Directors drawn from the shareholders to manage the affairs of the Market House. The Board of Directors would set the budget and share size, be responsible for the business plan, the selection of vendors, interface with other community groups and associations and ensure that Market House assumes its rightful responsibility as a meeting place in downtown Annapolis that is responsive and services the needs of the community and our guests.

"The Board of Director's would lease space(s) in the Market House to goods and service providers that:

Are owned and operated by local and independent business owners from the greater Annapolis area, meaning no chain stores, and no franchises. Should the Board decide to lease to vendors, such vendors should be at least 51 percent owned by individuals that live within 50 miles of the site.

Provide distinctive services for the community of Annapolis and our visitors. The elected Board of Directors, with the input of shareholders representative of the community at large, would designate the space of Market House as an asset to downtown and the community. This would ensure the Market House "takes its place" as a valued destination and meeting place for the community.

The ASBA is willing to act as honest broker for meetings and discussions until the AMHA is formed and viable. Should you want to join us in implementing this community-based solution, please e-mail info@Annapolisfirst.org.

The ASBA is hosting a March 21 conference committed to local business and community. The keynote speaker, Tracy Mitchell, of the Institute for Local Reliance, is an expert on community empowerment.

As St. Clair Wright stated, "The Market House is an exceptional example of a 'People's Landmark.' Because it has always been a meeting place where all income groups

communicate, its presence inspires a sense of community and the harmonious relationships so needed today ..."

Sound like a good Mission Statement.

The writer is president of the Annapolis Sustainable Business Alliance.