

The Berkshire Eagle

Prepared to preserve history, jobs

Developer eyes Bookless building

By Dick Lindsay, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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Monday, July 27 LEE -- A local businessman is prepared to redevelop the historic Bookless building -- a project being called the "last best chance" to save the downtown commercial structure.

Michael McManmon wants to convert the upper two floors of the 133-year-old building into the national headquarters for his Lee-based College Internship Program, which he founded 17 years ago. He said the first floor would remain as retail use, including the former H.A. Johansson's storefront. Paradise Island Tanning Salon and Lucky Nails currently occupy about half of the first floor, but the majority of the 18,000 square feet at 40-50 Main Street next to Lee Town Hall has been vacant for years.

McManmon expects the project estimated at more than \$2 million will create 12 new retail jobs and add 50 employees to his payroll over the next five years.

College Internship Program, which expanded into Indiana, California and Florida in the past seven years, helps young adults with Asperger's -- a high-functioning form of autism -- get a college education or begin a career through internships with local businesses. In Lee alone, McManmon said he has a \$5 million operation with 50 staff and 50 students located in 11 buildings around town.

McManmon views the project as the right time to consolidate his administration and eventually

expand his staff, while saving a piece of Lee's past.

"The Bookless building is the cornerstone of the whole downtown," he said. "Either it could be torn down or we develop it."

The latest proposal to rescue the Bookless building comes 16 months after Winstanley Associates of Lenox failed to relocate there his marketing design firm and sister company, Lenox Softworks. Lee officials are more encouraged that McManmon will succeed since he has secured a purchase and sale agreement for the building, something Winstanley Associates could not get from the current owners.

In fact, McManmon's project must succeed, according to Lee Community Development Corporation Executive Director Richard Vinette.

"It's the last best chance to save this important downtown building," said Vinette who noted the upper floors have been unused and in disrepair for almost 50 years.

Vinette is also surprised a second, somewhat similar project has come along so quickly.

"I didn't think I'd see another developer come along and want to completely renovate the building and create new jobs," he added.

Lee Board of Selectmen chairwoman, Patricia Carlino, said the project would "bring more life to the downtown" and McManmon would be a good steward of the Bookless building.

"He's proved his campus here is very well kept," she noted.

McManmon will informally discuss his project during a special selectmen's meeting tonight, 7 p.m. at the town hall. Besides residents, all town officials

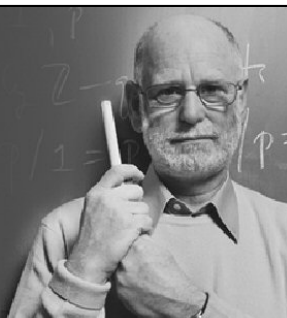
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and boards are urged to attend, especially if they will be involved in approving the redevelopment plans.

"When we have a big project come up," added Carlino, "we need to have everybody hear the same information at the same time."

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