Written by Todd McGreevy
Wednesday, 12 July 2000 18:00

This week, downtown Davenport property owner, John Ebeling either showed his largesse for those in need or he attempted a wake up call to the community regarding the state of negotiations for properties on the 200 block of 2nd Street, where the new Davenport Museum of Art is deemed to be built. On Monday, Ebeling invited the Churches United Food Pantry (who are losing their space at the base of the Kahl Building) to move down to his now empty new storefront at 211 2nd Street. New storefront because his family restored it completely after a fire in 1996. Empty storefront because, according to Ebeling, persons charged with relocating property owners and tenants from the block lured his tenant away with unfair incentives and scare tactics regarding the demolition of his building, all this prior to settling on an agreeable purchase price for the building that has been in his family for over 100 years. Sylvia's, which had been in business at 211 2nd Street for over 25 years, moved in February to the northeast corner of Brady and 3rd Streets at the base of the MidAmerican building into a space managed by the city. According to Sylvia's owner Connie Dunkle, they wanted to ensure their customers knew they were not going to close when the new DMA moved downtown. A representative of the Downtown Davenport Development Corporation, Gene Meeker, showed them the empty storefront where Hickey Brothers Cigars used to be. Since Sylvia's had no lease with the Ebeling's, they saw this as an opportunity to stay downtown and maintain their business. According to Dunkle, Dana Waterman, presumably on behalf of the city of Davenport, then negotiated a new lease for Sylvia's and even assisted with their moving expenses. Waterman happens to also be the counsel for the new Museum Foundation, the entity charged with acquiring the land, designing and building the new building. (Waterman was unavailable for comment at the writing of this article.) Meanwhile, the current status of the actual land to be acquired to build the new DMA upon is cloudy at best. Talk to any of the building owners who must move for the DMA to be built, from Del Rich Company, the Ebelings or Rhomberg Furriers, and suddenly the sense of confidence that all will work itself out is not so apparent. Rather, negotiations could be heading toward condemnation if the tenor of the building owners' perception of current negotiations is any barometer. Condemnation should be the furthest consideration because, for the most part, it appears that the building owners at the site are willing sellers—willing if the price is right. But at a minimum, the city owes it to the public to make any and all discussion of "possible" or "probable" condemnation public, ensuring the pros and the cons for the city and the downtown are discussed up front. After all, the city is committing at least $3 million, possibly as much $6.5 million to leverage another $24 million for a world-class museum, which makes good business sense by any measurement. But if the City is asked to participate even further by using its power of condemnation, then that decision should be made with public input and evaluation of all the circumstances regarding the property owners' rights and privileges balanced with the effects condemnation will have on our downtown and subsequently the entire health of the city of Davenport. In other words, is condemnation worth the alienation of three downtown business owners who have been there paying taxes, some since the turn of the century? As one Ebeling put it, "Our family has been paying taxes here for over 100 years and now, when all we hear is how wonderful the downtown is going to be, we're not even invited to the party." These business and property owners should be courted, not alienated, and certainly not underestimated as to their value to Davenport's downtown. As fabulous as the new DMA is intended to be, it alone cannot sustain "the party," so to speak. Downtown revitalization will need to keep those already invested in downtown, as well as new investment. That said, if the state of things with the Del Rich, Ebeling and Rhomberg buildings are any indication, we're at risk of loosing more of our longest running, more stable

neighbors. On the hand, if it's good business for Davenport to condemn the properties because the owners are demanding an unreasonable selling price and are making it cost prohibitive to be relocated, then so be it. "Pigs get fat, hogs get slaughtered," as the saying goes. But it works both ways. It may be even better business for Davenport to negotiate purchase prices for the properties that allow the current owners to reinvest in their downtown around the new museum. Certainly the people who come downtown to shop at Del Rich, Rhomberg's and Sylvia's count as visitors to the new museum? Meeker explains that, since the property owners he's attempted to relocate all want to continue owning somewhere downtown, it has been difficult to find the right space. "Each business owner has its own complicated criteria for location, facility and frontage and it makes it tough to find the right spot." [And because we have torn down so many of the buildings in our inventory, it's not surprising, but that's another story.] We need to ask ourselves, 'how much a part does what is perceived by building owners as indifference and poor communication play into the financial feasibility of not being able to relocate these owners?' Chances are that if these businesses are removed from participating in downtown, especially through condemnation, planners and developers for downtown will regret their absence in the future. Fred Ebeling, one of the building owners and a local architect who has worked on ten Von Maur Department stores in the US and has traveled extensively, is quick to point out that, "In any of the successful downtowns that I've visited, they've always included a mix of retail. Without it [retail], your downtown is dead. And at the rate things are going downtown now, one could think that the remaining [retail] survivors are being eliminated." What we don't need in order to accomplish a rebirth in downtown is cannibalizing our own property owners, especially with taxpayer's money. We should be working closely with these people by allowing them to help shape the future of our downtown. We should avoid the manipulative tactics the City employed in their last condemnation of private property, where taxpayers ended up paying a much higher price for the property than if normal negotiations had ensued. After all, these property owners are our veteran soldiers for downtown commerce. When all the other business abandoned the downtown for the malls, these businesses stayed and prevailed. Now, when things are finally looking brighter for Davenport's downtown, and their families' perseverance can finally pay off, our priority as a community should be to reward them for their loyalty and stamina. We absolutely owe it to them to invite them to the party. Note: The Publisher of the Reader is on the DMA Board of Trustees and the owners of the Reader also own property in downtown Davenport.