

Columbia officials discuss expired tax initiative

BY DEAN LEE EVANS
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Columbia Borough and Columbia School District officials met Thursday night to discuss the future of a commercial tax initiative that expired two years ago.

No action was taken at the meeting, but a six-member committee was formed to hash out differences and work on reauthorizing the initiative for approval next month.

School board president Tom Strickler and board members Donna Kreiser and Kathy Hohenadel will represent the school district on the committee. Council president Mary Wickenheiser and coun-

cil members Jim Smith and Kelly Murphy will represent the borough.

The Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance program, or LERTA, was created to offer tax breaks up to five years for qualified residential and commercial borough properties.

The program benefits residential, homeowner-owned properties in the historic district and, prior to the commercial initiative's expiration, borough commercial/industrial properties with tax abatements for property improvements.

Wickenheiser said the commercial initiative expired in 2009, five years after it was

jointly adopted by the borough and school district.

She said officials became aware that the commercial initiative had expired when someone inquired about it six months ago.

In August, council approved resolutions to reauthorize the commercial initiative without an expiration date and to eliminate the residential initiative's 2014 expiration date.

However, the resolutions cannot go into effect unless the school district adopts its own resolutions supporting council's actions.

School district officials are concerned with the borough's move to eliminate the expi-

ration dates for both LERTA initiatives.

School district business manager Laura Cowburn and other school directors believe it is necessary to maintain a five-year expiration date for each initiative.

Borough manager Norman Meiskey said it takes time and money to reauthorize each LERTA resolution.

"It costs \$1,000 to \$2,000 for attorney fees and advertising to adopt a resolution," Meiskey said.

He said that any change to the program's deadlines would not impact the terms of the abatement program on the part of the applicant.

Wickenheiser and Meis-

key suggested making both initiatives expire on the same date.

She said until the school district approves a resolution reauthorizing the commercial initiative, no one could apply for the tax incentives.

School director Vern Detz questioned the effectiveness of LERTA, which he said has not spurred significant results.

"Why even have it on the books?" he asked.

"We need to use these tools as an incentive to get developers and investors to rehabilitate and use older buildings," Meiskey said. "We need all the tools in our tool bag."

He noted there are eight

vacant buildings in the borough, and they are potential targets for trespassers and "fire bugs."

"(The buildings) are albatrosses around our necks," he said.

School board president Tom Strickler said the borough and the district need to investigate why inquiries into the program don't turn into successful applications.

Cowburn said LERTA has suffered from a lack of promotion.

During last week's meeting, Wickenheiser recommended expanding the residential initiative to all borough properties.