

Fire Sprinkler Idea Catching On

By Bill Teeter

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Property owners in downtown Grapevine know there's no insurance policy for history.

Many of the owners favor the city's proposal to get about 30 of Grapevine's oldest properties protected by fire sprinklers, even if it costs them thousands.

The sprinklers could reduce risks and cut insurance costs, property owners and business managers said.

Debi Meek said the job in the 1900s building she co-owns with her husband, Michael, at 404 S. Main St. could cost about \$20,000.

"I think it's a really good idea; it protects the buildings. That's something everybody wants to do, but it is costly," she said.

Her building, the former Grapevine Home Bank, was said to have been robbed by associates of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker in 1932.

The bank is the kind of building that makes Grapevine's downtown historic and gives the area a flavor that draws tourists and shoppers. But the city and property owners such as Meek think the area is vulnerable to a fire that could damage or end the city's historic atmosphere. The city is working on a plan that would prompt property owners in the 300 and 400 blocks of South Main to install sprinkler systems in their buildings. The whole project will cost about \$1.6 million with the city and owners sharing the cost, City Manager Bruno Rumbelow said. The city would grant low-interest loans to property owners so the work could be done at one time. The owners would repay the city for work done inside their buildings.

The city would pay for exterior connections from waterlines to the buildings.

Plano has a similar program to equip about 60 downtown properties with sprinkler systems. The Grapevine and Plano programs are unusual, said Virgil McDill, a spokesman for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. He said he knows of no other programs like them in the nation.

Grapevine Fire Marshal Mike Keefer said the buildings are not dangerous, but their historic nature is an incentive to protect them. The fire protection originally built into them -- double-brick walls between storefronts -- was sound, but breaches made in the walls over the years and the age of the building material mean they'll burn quickly if they catch fire, he said.

City Councilwoman Sharron Spencer came up with the idea about two years ago after noticing fire sprinklers in the 19th-century building housing the Stagecoach restaurant in Salado between Waco and Austin.

Other fires in historic buildings have gotten the attention of the council, Spencer said. "Every time something like that happens everybody just cringes," she said.

Snyder lost an early 1900s building in a downtown fire in 2003. The Hill County Courthouse had to be rebuilt after it burned in 1993, and in 1991 the Old Bedford School in Bedford was severely damaged by fire.

The Grapevine city staff is discussing the project with property owners in hope they will all participate, Public Works Director Matt Singleton said. Rumbelow said the staff hopes to complete design work late this year and installations in early 2008.

Councilwoman Darlene Freed is among property owners who could be involved. The estimated cost on properties at 409 and 412 S. Main is \$27,000.

Freed is abstaining from council actions and discussions regarding the project. Her business partner, Bob Mundlin, said he's in favor of the sprinklers because it would be "devastating" to lose them.

"These buildings, their architecture is effectively irreplaceable," Mundlin said.

Some property owners don't like the proposal.

Rose Turman, who owns buildings at 405 and 326 S. Main, said she does not want to participate because the cost is too high, and the city would have a lien on the building until the debt was paid.

Tino Valdez, who rents space downtown for his business, Paloma Boutique, said the value of protecting the buildings is clear. "You can't replace a building that's been here 140 years," he said.

He said he worries that the project could lead to increased rents for shop owners.