

MILO ARTS CENTER OWNERS, CITY NEAR FIRE-SAFETY COMPROMISE

Published: Friday, March 9, 2001

NEWS 03D

By Kevin Mayhood

Dispatch Staff Reporter

The city, a judge and the owners of the Milo Arts Center appear to be converging on a plan to keep the former school open and allow artists to continue to work and live there.

Columbus has threatened eviction since September, saying the building at 617 E. 3rd Ave. is unsafe.

But owner Rick Mann testified that he and his wife, Donna, have had fire walls and doors, emergency lights and exit markers installed. They also have had fire-alarm and sprinkler systems designed to bring the place into compliance with fire codes, Mann said.

"It's clear to the court there are improvements going on, and at some point, there is the possibility of a partial or temporary occupancy permit," said Richard C. Pfeiffer Jr., Franklin County Environmental Court judge.

Assistant City Attorney Patsy Thomas, who had been pushing to evict the occupants and close the building, agreed.

"If the life-safety issues are addressed, per code, they can get a temporary occupancy permit, which will allow the people to stay while they bring the rest of the building into compliance," she said.

Mr. Mann said the couple have spent about \$161,000 on improvements and interim safety measures since the city cited them for a lack of fire protection in September. At that time, the city issued an order to clear the building of all occupants within three days; that order was overruled by Pfeiffer, who is continuing to hear testimony in the case.

Mr. Mann estimated that the remaining fire-safety features will cost \$154,000. He said he hopes to be able to seek the temporary permit within two months.

Although everyone appeared to be close to an agreement, how they got there is in some dispute.

Thomas said the city has been trying to get the building into compliance since the 1980s. Only when they got the court involved, she said, did it begin to see improvements.

Mr. Mann presented fire-inspection reports from 1992 to 1998 that make no mention of a need for a fire alarm or sprinklers. Inspection reports in 1997 and 1998 also cite no violations, he said.

Since he and a business partner bought the building in 1983, Mr. Mann said, he has worked with the city to make improvements. He read from a 1992 building permit that was to bring the building into code and said they have been slowly following that plan.

"It has no time limits," he said.

His partner, Russell Snider, died in 1995, Mr. Mann said. He and Mrs. Mann have continued the slow renovation, he said.

During the hearing yesterday, artists who live at Milo said they have formed an organization to seek nonprofit status and are seeking grants to pay for the \$50,000 alarm system. In return, they expect the Manns to keep rent stable for a while.

After the hearing, Mrs. Mann said the couple has been strapped paying for the improvements.

"We need to clear up the court case in order to refinance the project," she said. "I think things will move on OK with that."

kmayhood@dispatch.com