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Glacier Hotel's fate in EPA's hands for now

By Scot Heisel, Cut Bank Pioneer Press
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Crews battle the Glacier Hotel fire in July of 2021. File photo by Matt Waller

It's been nearly a year and a half since the Glacier Hotel in Cut Bank was destroyed by a late-night fire, and the community should soon learn whether a federal crew is on the way to clean up the site.

The fire — one of the most intense in the city's history — required more than 16 hours of suppression efforts on July 11, 2021. At the time, Chief Jimmy Littrell of the Cut Bank Volunteer Fire Department estimated about 700,000 gallons of water were required to quell the blaze.

The fire left the once-historic structure crumbling, with a caved-in roof and piles of bricks and other debris throughout the property along the 100 block of 1st Avenue SW, just a block from Main Street.

Three months later the city announced that testing showed lead from the property is not a health hazard, but the debris piles contain asbestos-contaminated material that should be removed. While the debris was determined not to be an airborne threat to the community, the level of contamination puts a hefty price tag on cleanup.

In the fall of 2021, City Attorney Robert Smith estimated the cost of cleanup to be \$300,000 to \$400,000. When it became clear that the property owner was not able to pay for cleanup and insurance wouldn't cover all of it, Sweetgrass Development, a nonprofit economic agency based in Great Falls stepped up to help out. Due to the contamination, Sweetgrass staff invited the Environmental Protection Agency to visit the site as part of its federal Brownfields Program.

Joyce Ackerman, on-scene coordinator for the EPA's Region 8 office in Denver, said last week that the project was in line for brownfields funding in 2022, but other projects took priority and the funding ultimately fell through. If it had gone forward, the work would have been scheduled for September or October of this year.

"I had all my ducks in a row last year," Ackerman said. "I think it qualified for cleanup under our program, but we didn't have enough funding to do it last year."

The project is back on the EPA's list of projects for 2023.

"I think there's a very high probability that the EPA will be able to come in and do it in 2023," Ackerman said. She added that the project application will be resubmitted in February, with cleanup work potentially beginning in June or July.

With the federal government potentially getting involved, the cost of the project has more than doubled. Brownfield projects require higher levels of certification among workers and a disposal process that meets federal hazardous waste guidelines.

“If the city had done the ticketing and gone through the process, and a judge said, ‘clean it up,’ it would have been about a \$400,000 price tag,” Cut Bank Mayor Kim Winchell said in October. “But that was through the (Montana Department of Environmental Quality). Now that the EPA is involved ... the cost estimate has risen to \$1 million.”

Should the EPA funding fall through in 2023, the city’s options for cleaning up the property are limited.

Mayor Winchell said the final cost is beyond anything the city’s general fund can handle.

“If your neighbor has a nuisance property and the city is forced to clean it up, we can afford to absorb that cost,” Winchell said. “But if you multiply that exponentially, it would be impossible to do without asking the residents of Cut Bank to help pay for that. ... The reason the city hasn’t moved forward is ... we’ve had a specialist come in ... and determine there is no airborne hazard to the community,” and the cost has risen so sharply.

Winchell said the city’s best option right now is to wait and see what happens with the EPA.

Sarah Converse, executive director of Sweetgrass Development, believes there are other options. Converse said her organization is exploring obtaining funding through the EPA’s revolving loan fund. She also described a scenario in which the local port authority might take control of the property — with the current owner’s blessing — and transfer ownership to a nonprofit, which should make it easier to secure cleanup funding.

“We’re going to talk after the first of the year to see if there’s other funding elsewhere to use on this,” Converse said. “We’ll also be pursuing ARPA funds as well. ... If we can just get it cleaned up and on a higher level for tax rolls, it would be better for everyone.”

The scorched former hotel sits on a lot with two other vacant buildings that were not damaged by the fire. At the time of the fire, the hotel’s owner, Don Burlingame of Cut Bank, was in the process of selling the property to the owner of the other two structures, with development of the entire lot in the works.

Burlingame said the deal was set to close within a week when the fire happened. Instead of being altogether clear of the property, he’s been stuck with an eyesore of a building and a massive cleanup bill.

Burlingame said he signed papers allowing the EPA to install a fence around the property, but that was never done.

“We have boarded that building up three times,” Burlingame said. “They keep stealing the plywood.”

Despite the hazards involved, people keep trespassing on the site. Cut Bank Police Chief Mike Schultz said his staff has arrested and ticketed about a dozen people. For each of those cases, Burlingame has had to testify in court.

“We’re waiting to see what happens,” he said. “It’s not under my control anymore. ... I’m waiting for (the EPA) to move, because there’s nothing I can do.”