

Central Business District Code Compliance program helping to develop downtown area

By CALLEY LAMAR
calley@poncacitynews.com

The central business district in downtown Ponca City is a historic one with many of the buildings in the area being approximately 100 years old. But as time marches forward, so too does new standards and changes to building and safety codes.

It isn't unusual to see headlines about downtowns throughout the country that have historically had terrible fires resulting in entire blocks burnt to the ground when one store catches fire. This is due to these buildings having common walls, making putting out these catastrophic fires significantly more difficult.

The central business district remains underdeveloped and underutilized in Ponca City as many of the buildings in the downtown area feature older architecture which included shared walls, a lack of fire suppression on their second floors, and exits that would be deemed improper by modern code. Because of

this, improvement projects or changes in the use of the buildings often fail to get off the ground due to the cost of code compliance.

To this end, a new program was devised that would help developers in the district with their improvement projects. Known as the "Central Business District (CBD) Code Compliance", the project was conceived by City Manager Craig Stephenson and Development Services Director Chris Henderson, who both recognized a need for this particular type of program.

"We were running into the problem of fire suppression, and it was keeping a lot of downtown from being developed. And so we thought that we would create a program and assist people, and maybe spur some development, especially on the second floor (of downtown)," said Henderson. "You have to do this, as these buildings do not have exits that protect people from fires and doesn't allow them to get out. And that's why you have to provide

the fire suppression, to give them the opportunity to leave the building safely. It's exits that always seem to be the issue that you can't overcome, so fire suppression is the only way to do that."

It was in February of 2023 that a resolution with rules, regulations, development agreements, and applications was brought to the Ponca City Utility Authority (PCUA) for approval. The PCUA approved the resolution, which also established an annual fund set aside in the amount of \$240,000, to assist downtown property owners, who wish to improve their property to make way for a new occupant or a change of use that triggers the mandatory installation of a fire suppression system. The CBD program grants a 50% cash incentive to install a fire suppression system up to and not exceeding \$60,000. For example, if the cost of a fire suppression system was \$78,000, then the incentive to the developer would be

(See CODE, Page 2)

Code Compliance...

Con't from Page 1

50% or \$39,000.

"So the reuse of a lot of this space, you run into a roadblock right off the bat in the fact that you need fire suppression to protect the occupants in the first floor and the second floor. This is intended to spur some development by reducing the cost to owners that want to develop a property," said Henderson.

Thus far, three projects have applied to the use of this program. The first of these was for the rehabilitation of the building located at 113 N. 14th St., otherwise known as "The Alley" in March of 2023. This building was originally constructed with minimal regard to exits, protected corridors, and other life safety provisions that are common in newer buildings. This meant that the plans for a gathering spot and entertainment venue were limited due to code compliance, as fire code mandates that a fire suppression system be a part of the life safety code compliance.

Their second project was for the Combat Syndicate at 305 S. Pine Street. This was a new location for the Combat Syndicate, but they were limited to operating on only the first floor of the building due to the lack of a sprinkler for the second floor and basement areas.

Thanks to the CBD program, the Combat Syndicate can now utilize all of its space.

Third project is currently ongoing and is for the building on the corner of 2nd and Grand, which was formerly the Boomerang Diner. This project is seeing four apartments set up in the second floor of the building, and a restaurant on the first floor. This is a \$94,000 sprinkler project, with a \$47,000 reimbursement from the CBD program. Without the sprinkler system, the developer would've been unable to use the second floor space.

"The program has started out very well, and I know we have future projects coming," said Henderson. "PCUA is committed to continuing funding this thing as we go along."