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## Vacant store stirs angry blog

Planner says city should condemn Fontius block

By John Rebchook, Rocky Mountain News

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Ken Schroepfel, an urban planner whose Web site tracks the downtown Denver development scene, on Thursday launched a "personal campaign" to have the city use its power of eminent domain to redevelop the long-empty Fontius block on the 16th Street Mall.

"How many of you are sick and tired of the Fontius Shoes building at the corner of 16th and Welton sitting there vacant and in disrepair?" he wrote in his blog at [denverinfill.com](http://denverinfill.com). "I am. In fact, I'm pretty angry about it."

The building has been vacant for about 20 years, he wrote, apparently because of a dispute involving the Cook family, which owns it. Gary Cook didn't return a call on Thursday.

"The topic of eminent domain has been a hot one over the past few years, and a lot of people are very sensitive to the concept of a city using its condemnation powers for economic development purposes," Schroepfel continued. "Yet, if there was ever a situation in which it would be justifiable, it's got to be this one."

Schroepfel, an urban planner at the Matrix Design Group, said he hopes the city, the Denver Urban Renewal Authority, the Downtown Denver Partnership, a "few prominent community-minded developers and a lot of fed-up citizens" make it a priority to get the block redeveloped.

Calling it a "personal campaign" on his blog is a bit of poetic license, Schroepfel said in an interview.

"I'm not going to quit my day job," he said. "But I am going to use my blog as a sort of a soapbox. Downtown has so many positive things happening. We're making some real progress getting rid of surface parking lots and revitalizing downtown. But you come to this block. It just sort of sucks the life out of what otherwise could be a dynamic location."

Tracy Huggins, executive director of DURA, said she, too, has long wanted the block developed. But the use of eminent domain isn't in the cards, she said.

"Given that (Mayor John Hickenlooper) is very reluctant to use eminent domain and the current political situation. . . . I think that it is quite remote" that eminent domain would ever be used.

"That is a tool we use appropriately and sparingly," she said, noting DURA has only used it three times in the past 14 years.

The only way the building would be condemned using eminent domain would be if it threatened the public health and safety of residents, said John Huggins, Denver's economic development director.

"So if it were literally falling down, we would use eminent domain," said Huggins, who is no relation to Tracy Huggins. "But I absolutely would want to see it redeveloped. It's a handsome historic building on a key place on the 16th Street Mall. I think it is shameful that nothing has happened."

Tami Door, president of the Downtown Denver Partnership, said she also wants to see the site redeveloped.

"It really is an important centerpiece for downtown," Door said. "We look forward to the day it is developed to its best and highest use. It's an extremely important block and it is unfortunate it has sat empty for these many years. We would be open to work with developers and anyone else to look at opportunities for its redevelopment."

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Pedestrians walk by the vacant Fontius Shoes building on the 16th Street Mall at Welton Street on Thursday. Urban planner Ken Schroepfel says the city should use its power of eminent domain to condemn the building and pave the way for redevelopment.