

Amid last-ditch preservation effort, former Danville tobacco factory slated to be demolished

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Nov 9, 2019



Once a tobacco stemmery, then a clothes factory, then a warehouse for Schewel's Furniture, the city of Danville is in the process of demolishing this crumbling building on the corner of High and Floyd streets.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

Broken glass litters the ground, and vines snake up the front of the abandoned building where faded lettering from multiple past occupants marks the front.

The old tobacco factory on the corner of Floyd and High streets in northern Danville was first built in 1876 as a tobacco stemmery, where workers, mostly African American, stripped tobacco leaves and removed the leaves from the stems so that they could be processed.

Several efforts to preserve the building at 549 High St. — one from a company looking to develop apartments, others from preservationists — have failed, and the building's condition has continued to deteriorate leading the city of Danville to move forward with demolition.

Sonja Ingram, a preservation field services manager with Preservation Virginia, is making some last-minute efforts to preserve the building, which is nestled on the inside border of the Downtown Historic District and borders the Mechanicsville Historic District, a residential, working class neighborhood where many of the African American workers for the factories lived.

“There’s just a lot of interesting juxtapositions of history here,” Ingram said.

The city of Danville deemed the building unsafe in April. The demolition process, which began recently, will cost just under \$94,000.

D.J. Bisson, the property maintenance coordinator for the city of Danville, said the building’s structure is in poor shape. The roof is inadequate, which has allowed rain to persistently inundate the inside, further deteriorating the floors and structure.

“They’ve tried doing some repair work, but I think it’s just too costly to repair,” he said.

Since the city already has begun removing some of the interior, Ingram has one last ditch idea she is working on. Instead of keeping the entire building, she wants to preserve just the outer walls as part of a ruin. These, she said, could be part of a small park area, with art on the walls showing what the building used to be.

“I feel there’s some buildings that are just too important to just tear down,” she said.

Her plan is dependent on grants from the Virginia Outdoors Association.

Additionally, part of the adjacent attached building, which was deteriorating, collapsed and fell into the middle of High Street several years ago during a storm.

First constructed in 1876, the tobacco factory was one of five in Danville that belonged to the New York-based Kinney Tobacco Co., which joined with several other tobacco companies to form the American Tobacco Co. in 1890.

A Sanborn map — which is a detailed city map showing fire insurance companies their total liability — from 1886 shows the stemmery contained 30 rooms for drying the stems. Sometime during the 1910s, Anderson Bros. obtained the building, which was used for manufacturing overalls. By the mid-1900s, Schewel Furniture Co. began using the building as a warehouse.

Local historian Gary Grant said this conversion of factories into warehouses is common.

“Former tobacco factories were taken on ... and pressed into use as warehouses,” he said.

By the 1990s, the building no longer was in use, Ingram said.

Due to outstanding code violations, the Danville Redevelopment and Housing Authority acquired the property for no money in the summer of 2014, at which time the buildings were used for storage.

Rehab Development Inc., in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, agreed to convert the area — which included two buildings, one of which collapsed — into 23 loft-style apartments, a courtyard and parking lot and even received approval from the River District Design Commission.

The company never followed through on the development, so the building has remained vacant. Representatives from Rehab Development could not be reached for comment on this story.

Ingram said in March a few people moved to acquire the building from the city, but could not come up with the funds needed to purchase it.

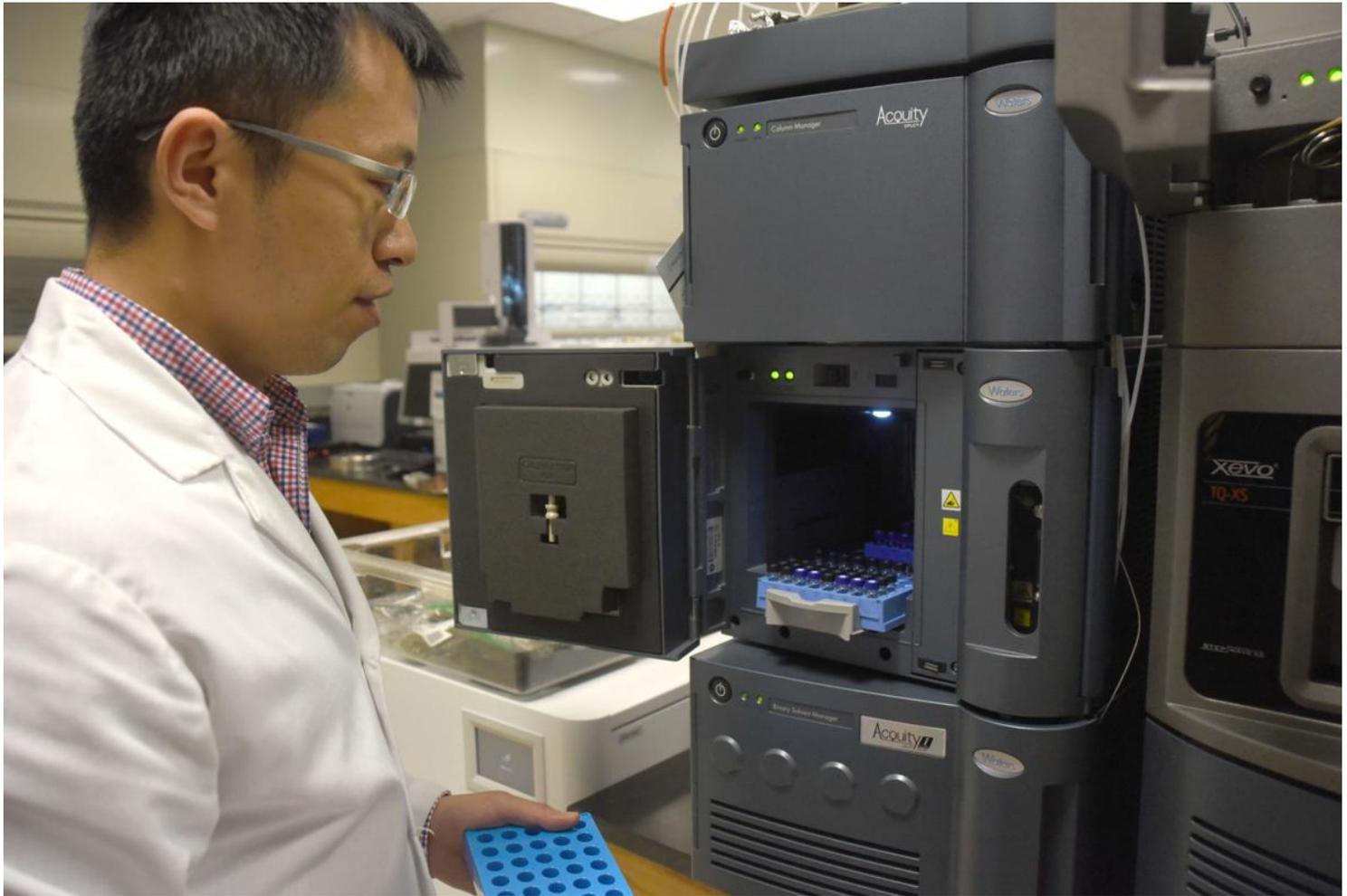
Right now, the city does not have any plans for the plot of land once the building is demolished.

“There are no plans for the property other than to remove an unsafe structure,” said Kenneth Gillie, Danville director of planning.

Ayers reports for the Register & Bee. Reach him at (434) 791-7981.

Hemp growing season 'a learning experience' for Pittsylvania County growers; financial viability still a question

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Nov 17, 2019



Yimeng "Jack" He, an analytical chemist and lab manager at the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research, opens the door to a mass spectrometer that can examine 96 samples of hemp at once. Before it can be analyzed, the plant must be dried, ground up, and converted into a liquid form.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

Though some of the more than 16 reported acres of industrial hemp planted in Pittsylvania County still is in the ground waiting to be harvested, growers and industry specialists already are learning some lessons from this year.

"It's been a learning experience really for all parties involved," said Stephen Barts, Pittsylvania County extension agent.

Producers are hoping it can serve as a cash crop and tobacco replacement. However, the financial viability still is in question, as buyers still are conducting tests that ultimately will determine the price points.

“It was a big learning curve this year,” said Bob Harris, a Pittsylvania County farmer who grew hemp and as of now is still unsure of the net results. “We learned a lot about what not to do.”

While the lessons of this year — such as fertilization methods and how the plants respond to drought stress — are valuable, Barts said it will be a while before area growers understand the full extent of what they’re dealing with.

“The ’19 growing season was about understanding the questions that need answering,” Barts said.

Not only is each crop unique and nuanced, but each growing season presents different challenges for farmers to face.

“One growing season is very anecdotal information because each growing season has its own anomalies,” Barts said.

Danville’s Institute for Advanced Learning and Research played an active role with hemp growers in the region by hosting educational seminars, a hemp summit and serving as one of the primary testing centers in the area.

“It’s new so there’s lots of areas of need,” said Mark Gignac, executive director of the institute.

This growing season, which started in June and July and is in the latter stages of harvest now, the Institute has worked with 120 growers throughout the region.

With regulation limiting the amount of tetrahydrocannabinol — or THC, which is the part of marijuana that makes someone high — to 0.3% and the profit margins hinging on the concentration of cannabidiol, or CBD, in the plant, proper testing is extremely important.

Industrial hemp has a variety of uses, but the Pennsylvania farmers growing it are focusing on harvesting CBD, which occurs naturally in the flowers of the female plant and has been used primarily for pain relief.

Hemp growers want to harvest their plants with as much CBD as possible — a minimum of 6%, with 10% meaning decent profits, Gignac said — while remaining under 0.3% of THC.

One of the primary difficulties faced this year was the lack of standardization in the testing, which resulted in each lab providing a different analysis of the same plants, Harris and Gignac said.

“That’s a big issue,” Harris said.

With experience working in the pharmaceutical field, Yimeng “Jack” He, an analytical chemist and lab manager at the institute, has worked hard to develop an efficient hemp testing methodology that will yield accurate results. Part of that process involves drying the samples growers bring, grinding it into a consistent powder and converting it into a liquid form that can be tested.

“The industry as a whole should have a consensus in the testing methodology,” He said.

At the institute, He tests the solutions in a state-of-the-art liquid chromatography–mass spectrometry system that separates each element of the solution and measures its chemical composition.

“This is a very automated system that eliminates a lot of human error,” He said.

Another problem, Gignac said, was the lack of contracts between buyers and sellers agreeing on a third-party to test the chemical makeup of the crop — since that is what determines the price.

“We want to be that third party independent lab,” he said.

At the end of October, the United States Department of Agriculture opened a public comment period on the establishment of the a variety of proposed hemp regulations, including testing standards.

Congress legalized the commercial production of industrial hemp that contains less than 0.3% THC with the Hemp Farming Act of 2018. Right now, 18 states allow the commercial production of hemp, all with varying degrees of regulation. Many other states only allow research production, and some states don't have any laws on the matter.

In Virginia, all research and commercial hemp programs are supervised by Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, as well as the Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture and Human Services.

Across the state of Virginia, producers planted 1,437 acres of hemp, according the Farm Service Agency November acreage report. Sixteen of those were in Pittsylvania County, while Brunswick, Hanover and Mecklenburg producers each planted upward of 200 acres.

Until tests are completed and payments made, a lot of questions linger.

“A lot of the questions that we had going into the season still remain unanswered,” said Barts.

“We're just going to have to wait a couple more years,” added Harris. “We got to have something. The tobacco industry is just dying ... so hopefully this will be a viable alternative.”

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With vaping clouded in controversy, Danville store owner fears ban on flavors will kill business

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Sep 15, 2019



Store manager Mathew Moser talks to one of his regular customers at Lunar Vapes, which has seen a significant downturn in business in recent weeks due to the recent cluster of respiratory illnesses and deaths nationwide that have been linked to vaping. President Donald Trump announced the potential banning of flavors for e-cigarettes on Wednesday afternoon, a move that could put many vape shops like Lunar out of business.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

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Mathew Moser, who used to smoke a pack and a half of cigarettes per day, has felt much better since he replaced cigarettes with vaping eight years ago. He remembers barely being able to hold his breath under water, but now is physically active and said he hasn't needed to see a doctor in years.

“I play soccer twice a week,” he said. “I still run, I still swim, I still vape.”

As the manager of Lunar Vapes on Riverside Drive, he said sales have declined significantly during the past few weeks at the store because of the cluster of lung illnesses — including six confirmed deaths — that have been connected with e-cigarettes and vaping.

Business could decline even more. President Donald Trump announced Wednesday the federal government will move to ban thousands of flavors used in e-cigarettes, The Associated Press reported. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said the Food and Drug Administration will aim to remove all flavors except tobacco.

Moser argued outlawing the flavors would cause more people to return to smoking actual cigarettes, which he sees as a much more of a health threat.

“If they wanted to vape tobacco they would keep [smoking cigarettes]” he said.

Vaping, which hit the mass market in the United States in 2007, consists of using a battery-operated device with a cartridge containing e-liquid that is heated up into an aerosol to be inhaled, according to the Atlanta, Georgia-based Centers for Disease Control. The e-liquid cartridges contain a vegetable glycerin-based liquid mixed with nicotine, flavoring and other chemicals. No tobacco is included in the mixture.

Brandon Swain, a customer at Lunar Vapes who has been using vaping products for five years, credits the product for helping him to quit chewing tobacco. He thinks a ban on flavors will be harmful for people who want to stop smoking.

“It’s harmed them more by taking this stuff off the shelf,” he said.

Moser said he and most of the nearly 35,000 vape shops around the country would be out of business if the ban on flavors goes through.

“That’s 99% of my products, e-flavored liquids,” he said.

Eric Womack, owner of EA Vapes on Mount Cross Road who has been vaping for five years, also opposes the ban. He feels the surge of illnesses is related specifically to tainted street-bought THC — the main mind-altering chemical in marijuana — being smoked in electronic cigarettes.

“It’s just very random that this is all coming up now,” he said.

The Food and Drug Administration said its preliminary research shows many of the samples tested in the investigation have contained both THC and vitamin E acetate, but cannot conclude it is the cause of the lung illnesses. Vitamin E acetate is a nutritional supplement often used in topical skin treatments, The Washington Post reported.

“Because consumers cannot be sure whether any THC vaping products may contain Vitamin E acetate, consumers are urged to avoid buying vaping products on the street, and to refrain from using THC oil or modifying/adding any substances to products purchased in stores,” the FDA wrote in a statement Sept. 6.

Certain conditions are needed for vitamin E acetate to form: vitamin E and acidic acid must both be present in a formula with a pH value under 4.8, said Vapor Beast — an e-commerce platform for smoking alternatives — in a news release.

“Our preliminary analysis shows that legitimate nicotine vaping products do not contain vitamin E acetate and do not have pH values below 4.8,” the release stated.

Linda Gibson-Young, an associate professor in the school of nursing at Auburn University who has done research about the effects of vaping on a person’s airways, hopes the ban is made official and enforced soon.

“The greatest concern is a clear awareness of what is in the electronic delivery device and how safe that is,” she said.

The different flavorings have not been heavily regulated or had much oversight, she said, which has resulted in a lack of understanding of how these devices interact with the body. She also expressed significant concern with youth vaping and the lack of research associated with e-cigarettes.

“The long term effects ... have not been studied,” she said.

Danville Mayor Alonzo Jones said he still is trying to learn more about e- cigarettes and the industry, but he is concerned about the way it is advertised to young people.

“Anything that we can do locally in the way that these things are marketed, we want to do it,” he said.

A law came into effect in Virginia on July 1 forbidding anyone younger than the age of 21 from buying any tobacco, nicotine or vaping products. Before that the minimum age was 18.

Mark Jones, superintendent of Pittsylvania County Schools, said the school district policy forbids anyone from possessing any nicotine, tobacco or vaping products on school grounds. He thinks a federal ban on different flavored products could help prevent underage use.

Moser rebutted the concern the vaping industry is targeting children. After demonstrating his cash register doesn’t work without swiping a valid ID card, he said convenience stores need to do a better job of consistently requiring identification for anyone trying to buy nicotine, tobacco or vaping products.

“We don’t want you to start vaping if you don’t smoke,” he said.

About 80% of his customers are trying to quit smoking or have already quit, and he has helped many of his family members stop smoking as well.

Chris Hall, a loyal customer at Lunar Vapes, said electronic cigarettes helped him quit tobacco and he doesn’t plan to drop vaping anytime soon.

“The problems are coming from people smoking things they shouldn’t be,” Hall said.

As of 7 p.m. Friday, a petition to the White House to stop the federal flavor ban of e-cigarette products had more than 94,400 signatures.

Womack thinks a better alternative to a ban is to strictly enforce current rules, particularly when it comes to selling to minors.

Moser argued more research is needed before any major policy decisions are made. In the meantime, he remains apprehensive.

“I don’t know what to expect, and that’s what scares me,” he said.

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