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## City Ready To Close Mall Deal On Monday

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BRISTOL -- The city has a fleet of dump trucks, several parks and more than a dozen schools, but next week it expects to own something no other Connecticut municipality does: A shopping mall.

City leaders agreed Friday evening to buy the ailing, half-vacant Bristol Centre Mall for about \$5.4 million in a deal that is scheduled to close Monday morning.

Mayor Gerard Couture described the decision as historic.

"This is the future of Bristol tonight in this room," Couture said as the city council and board of finance discussed the plan at City Hall. "Is Bristol going to be better off? I think so."

Acquiring and demolishing the mall is a key piece of the city's plan to revitalize its downtown, where businesses have been faltering for decades. The state may put up \$45 million toward the overall revitalization plan, and Couture said that prospect gives Bristol its best chance to rebuild downtown in generations.

"If that \$45 million doesn't come to Bristol, it certainly will go to another community. It's been going to Hartford, to Waterbury, to New Haven - it's about time Bristol got its fair share," he said.

But not everyone was upbeat.

"I'm against this whole fiasco. I think the lawyers are running this show," Ridgcrest Lane homeowner Dan Cassina told Couture, a first-term Democratic mayor. "You're wasting taxpayers' money. It's a tax and spend town - it never used to be that way, but it's getting way out of hand."

Former Mayor Frank Nicastro argued against approving the sale, which was negotiated only a few days ago. Nicastro, who has previously criticized Couture and the city council for keeping too many details about the project secret, asked why the city should run into such a huge deal without enough facts. He emphasized that state-funded environmental and marketing reports are still incomplete.

"I don't think there's anybody who doesn't want to see a better downtown. But let's make sure we're doing it right," said Nicastro. He complained that Couture and his administrators still can't say how much it will cost to remove asbestos in the building or clean up ground contamination on the 17-acre parcel.

Asbestos beneath the floor tiles could cost about \$600,000 to remove, said Jonathan Rosenthal, executive director of the Bristol Development Authority. The groundwater pollutants that have been discovered beneath the parking lot would cost anywhere from nothing to \$300,000 to remove, depending on where the city constructs buildings on the site, Rosenthal said.

But finance board member Delores Capers appeared skeptical about Rosenthal's figures, and cast the only vote against the purchase. City council member Al Myers did not attend and council member Ron Burns recused himself from voting; otherwise, the council and finance board were united in voting for the purchase.

Southbury-based Gatto Development agreed to sell the property for \$5.3 million, and city attorneys said that closing costs, fees and other expenses would probably put the final figure closer to \$5.4 million. The city will retain Gatto as mall manager for at least a month, and then may hire an interim manager until the building is demolished. **Houston Lowry**, the lawyer hired to help negotiate the sale, said demolition is not expected until next year.

Couture acknowledged that plenty of questions remain unanswered about the mall purchase and the future use of the property, but he insisted that inaction would be the worst move. He noted that there was reluctance in the late 1970s to give tax breaks to the then-tiny ESPN sports broadcasting company. ESPN is now the city's biggest employer and taxpayer, making up 7 percent of the entire tax base.

"Back then, the vote was 5-4," Couture said. "I say God bless number 5."

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