

Owner Of Abandoned Plant Sues For Expensive Graffiti

Corey Williams, Associated Press Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Detroit officials say a company's admission in a civil lawsuit against a small art gallery to owning the long-abandoned Packard Motor Car plant could jump-start the process of getting the blighted structure torn down.

Bioresource Inc. earlier this week filed a lawsuit against the operators of the 555 Arts gallery for the return of an 8-foot section of wall featuring artwork and a message by elusive British graffiti artist Banksy.

In the suit, Bioresource claimed to be the property's owner and listed local land speculator Romel Casab as president.

"The City of Detroit has had a long history of litigation with Bioresource Inc. over the ownership of this land and the condition of the structures on the property," Detroit Buildings & Safety Engineering Director Karla Henderson told The Associated Press on Thursday. "Now that it is clear and publicly acknowledged who the responsible party is, we will pursue all applicable areas of enforcement to hold the property owner accountable for this unsightly and dangerous situation."

The city wants the east side plant torn down and likely will move it through Detroit's condemnation procedure, which entails a number of hearings and appearances before the City Council, Henderson said.

Bioresource officials, including Casab, also may be asked to come forward and give depositions.

Demolition and cleanup of the site could cost upward of \$20 million, Henderson said.

The Associated Press left a message seeking comment from Bioresource lawyer Barry Steinway.

Operators of 555 Arts, using a masonry saw, helped cut the section of cinderblock wall from the building in May after learning Banksy had visited Detroit and stenciled a figure of a child holding a bucket of red paint and brush alongside the message: "I remember when all this was trees."

The wall and artwork was moved to their gallery in southwest Detroit where it is on display.

"We saved the piece," said Carl Goines, the gallery's executive director. "All evidence shows it was an abandoned and neglected building."

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But the gallery was notified in June that the Packard plant's owners wanted the wall and artwork back. The subsequent lawsuit claims the section of wall could be worth \$100,000 or more.

"If it's of monetary value, it's not surprising someone would step up and claim it," Goines said of the Banksy wall.

The Packard plant was built in the early 1900s on the 40-acre site and covered several city blocks. The last Packard automobile was built in the mid-1950s. When the car company shut down operations in the sprawling facility, other smaller industrial businesses set up shop.

Four decades later, few tenants were left and the plant increasingly became the target of thieves, metal scrappers, urban explorers and graffiti artists.

Now most exterior doors and loading docks are open to trespass. The site also has become a dumping ground for trash, tires and even thousands of shoes.

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