

By DOTTIE AUSTIN

From Our West Volusia Bureau

DELAND— City Commissioners reversed their position Monday and decided to grant permission for Manfred Benko to repair the condemned house he bought on the corner of N. Boston and Wisconsin avenues.

The switch came after the seller, James Bell, who identified himself as the president and owner of Boulevard Auto Rental and Sales, told the commission he was the one who sold the house to Benko and declared he had told him the place had been condemned.

On Feb. 7 Benko came before the commission and asked for building permits to fix up the house, which were denied. Commissioners at that time told Benko the place was scheduled for demolition "and should have been torn down months ago." They advised him "You ought to get your money back, son."

"There was no fraud involved," Bell insisted. "Benko was aware the house was condemned. He said he could do the work himself. I believe Benko will fix it up if you give him an opportunity. Put a time limit on him and if he doesn't do it, then go ahead with the demolition." Bell suggested.

The house had been condemned for months as unfit for human habitation and the city let a contract to a demolition firm to tear down this and several similar structures.

Bell said Benko had indeed come to him after the Feb. 7 meeting and asked for his money back and "threatened me with a lawsuit."

"But I talked to my lawyer and I told Benko if he ran a little short on the money he needs to fix it up, I'd loan him some money on a second lien. I'd even sacrifice my own profit," Bell insisted to commissioners, adding, "If you tear it down I'll have nothing but a piece of ground."

The lot is substandard and couldn't be built on by today's standards.

Benko told commissioners he was ready to start immediately and had purchased some of the materials.

"We are prepared to pay the liens the city has on the property," Bell said.

"How long have you owned this house?" commissioners asked Bell.

"About 35 or 40 days," he replied.

"I told Benko he might have a tougher time with the city building department because of what had happened and they'd be watching him closer. He thinks he can fix it in 90 days.

"I don't think 90 days will do it," Robert Handley, city engineer, told commissioners.

With that, Commissioner Jim Ed Summerhill, saying he'd rather "keep the property on the tax rolls," moved to give Benko until July 1, or about four and a half months, to get the property repaired to city specifications.

In other action, commissioners approved on second reading an ordinance closing a portion of the Old Daytona Road which runs along the south end of one of the runways at the DeLand airport. The expected opposition didn't materialize and nearby residents of the DeLand Highlands Betterment League, sent a letter. It said they'd accept the closing if the city would leave space for pedestrians and bicycle access to the road.