

## Longaberger's 'Big Basket' might go to sheriff's auction after sale collapses

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The sale of the Longaberger Co.'s former headquarters building in Newark has fallen through, and the iconic "Big Basket" building could be headed for a sheriff's auction.

In July, Teakwood Properties of Mason, Tennessee, offered \$1.55 million for the property, well below the original asking price of \$5 million. Longaberger accepted Teakwood Properties' bid, and the bidder had until near the end of August to move forward on taking possession of the property.

But the sale never went through, and a judgment entry was filed in the building's foreclosure case on Oct. 20, according to Licking County Treasurer Olivia Parkinson.

The next step is a sheriff's sale, which will be set in the near future, Parkinson said.

However, the offer from Teakwood Properties was one of at least three that Longaberger officials said had been made on the Big Basket over the past few years. Longaberger is entertaining a second offer but would not name the bidder, spokesman Brenton Baker.

"We are actively working to sell it and see to our obligations," Baker said. "The county and city want to see a signed contract, and we're getting that done. We talk to the city and county regularly, and everyone is looking for an amicable solution."

Who would want an office building in the shape of a giant basket is a question that has left many real-estate brokers scratching their heads for the past few years. But the look of the building is not the sole obstacle to selling it. The real issues are far more mundane, such as the location miles east of downtown Newark. Few companies that are sizable enough to occupy the 180,000-square-foot building are interested in being in a remote location.

Another challenge "is the fact that it's not a multi-tenant building, so it has to be one tenant," said Michael A. Simpson, president of NAI Ohio Equities commercial real-estate brokers.

"It's just so unique," said Simpson, who has not been involved in the sale. "And given its exterior, it's got to have some unique maintenance challenges. But they're smart people in Newark. I hope they find a creative use for it that benefits the community."

The basketmaker vacated the building in the summer of 2016, when a dozen or so office workers quietly moved out and into office space at the company's manufacturing plant in Frazeytsburg. In early October, the Longaberger Co. announced that it would move those employees again, back to the company's roots in Dresden.

Longaberger opened the Big Basket building in 1997 as the company was approaching its glory days.

The company has struggled since Dave Longaberger died in 1999. A combination of bad economic times and changing tastes in home decor sent sales from a peak of \$1 billion in 2000 to about \$100 million in 2014. Several rounds of layoffs occurred, leaving the company with several hundred employees, no more than 60 of them working in the basket building.

Longaberger Co. seemed to be on the path to recovery after CVSL (now called JRJR Networks), a holding company of direct-sales firms, bought a 51.7 percent stake in 2013. But financial problems persisted:

Longaberger Co. owes more than \$800,000 to various local taxing entities related to the cost of roadwork, lighting and other improvements made when the Big Basket was built.

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