

## Firestone site's owner due in court

By Lisa Perry | Posted: Monday, June 9, 2014 7:59 am

A Fort Wayne businessman is slated to appear in New Castle city court June 20 to update city leaders on what he plans to do with a major industrial property he owns on the east side of town.

Steven Morehead bought the abandoned Firestone plant in April 2012 at a Henry County Commissioners sale for \$5,300. Morehead thought he was getting a factory complex near rail lines that he'd seen online, city officials say. He got something less and now owes about \$8,000 in unpaid back taxes.

Morehead didn't take title to the property for months after he bought it. That is because until a judge signed off on the deed transferring ownership, the Fort Wayne businessman had no legal rights to do anything with it. The process takes months.

When Morehead's deed was legally registered in January, 2013, he was left with nothing but a pile of potentially toxic rubble where D Avenue meets 25th Street in the Belmont neighborhood.

Fires and salvage took their toll on the property between the time of the commissioners sale and Morehead's possession.

Within a short time after the commissioners sale, New Castle Fire Engine 2 pulled up outside the Firestone north gate around 10:30 a.m. April 20, 2012, thick smoke billowing through factory windows. Twenty-four New Castle fire fighters continued to battle flames until long past dusk, the acrid haze choking two of them. Firemen Brian Gard and Bill Sutherland were treated for stress and inhalation-induced abnormalities.

Valued at \$15 million before the fire, New Castle Fire Chief Mark Boatright estimated that property loss damages exceeded \$700,000. The fire apparently was caused by a man using a cutting torch too close to combustible material.



### 5-29 Firestone

Rubble piles lie scattered throughout the vacant lot at 1112 S. 25th that Firestone brake factory used to call home. The city redevelopment committee approved preliminary testing for soil at the site in preparation for potential clean-up.

The combustible material was rubber. After that fire, trash, tire and demolition debris sat piled at the site. Then, 24 days later, on May 13, demolition workers found more fire. The cause of this second fire remains undetermined. Firefighters had to sift through enormous amounts of trash to extinguish the fire thoroughly.

Piles of rubber material, concrete, brick and other debris still dot the abandoned landscape.

Morehead is a Johnny-come-lately to the long history of vandalism and neglect at the former brake factory site.

Prior to Morehead's purchase, Double Dapple Development, a Florida company lured to New Castle to rehabilitate the plant by former Mayor Jim Small and the city's redevelopment corporation in 2007, abandoned the property after vandals broke in and made mincemeat out of thousands of dollars of rehabilitation.

"Double Dapple was basically run out of town by vandals," Small said.

Small was special projects officer at the Economic Development Corporation at the time Double Dapple owned the property. City officials, Small, and Double Dapple owner Rob Czukor believed that any previous brake-manufacturing contamination had been remediated. Small said Double Dapple was aware at the time that Indiana Department of Environmental Management had not signed off on any such remediation guarantees.

"Double Dapple wanted to process used tires, extract steel belts from tires," Small said.

Double Dapple used a process called pyrolysis, which superheats materials for melting without combustion. Such material is used as a major component of rubberized playground coverings.

Czukor had remodeled the offices when vandals struck. After trespassers trashed new front offices, including chopping up new ceiling tiles, Czukor lost interest in the project. The rubber processing business never materialized.

Czukor had purchased the property from yet another financially-doomed endeavor, Stealth Boat, which divested itself of the Firestone property during Stealth Boat's liquidation earlier.

Attorney Tony Saunders of New Castle is listed as the registered agent for Double Dapple Development in records of the Indiana Secretary of State.

"I probably haven't had three conversations with Rob (Czukor) since 2008," Saunders said last week.

Saunders said it was Double Dapple that gave the go-ahead to take the building down. Shortly after the fire, all remaining steel was removed from the building's sagging skeleton, reducing anything left of what had been a major New Castle employer to heaping piles of rubble, potentially contaminated with rubber residue.

State environmental studies performed at the location during Double Dapple's ownership have expired. The city plans to approve a renewed effort to reassess what's truly at the bottom of the alleged contamination. Bore samples may begin soon.

"There is a suspicion since then that there is more contamination and they have to go through the whole cycle again," Small said.

The city considers the Connersville-to-New-Castle rail line that runs through the site a potentially advantageous selling point.

In the summer of 2013, the site was featured on a WTHR "13 Investigates" segment, when area residents complained and Henry County health inspectors called for foggers to reduce the mosquitoes breeding in the area. WTHR reported that IDEM was notified of potential health hazards at that time.

The property's fate may take a turn June 20 if Morehead appears in city court as ordered. His back tax bill has accrued to more than \$8,000, according to Henry County Auditor Pat French.

Efforts by The Courier-Times to contact Morehead have been unsuccessful.