

# A new life for Old Town Hall?

## Officials study future of downtown landmark

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STAMFORD — The stately Old Town Hall has stood at one of downtown's busiest intersections for more than a century, but all of a sudden it's at a different kind of crossroads.

A new board is about to take control of the 101-year-old Beaux Arts-style building, selecting tenants and overseeing an estimated \$11.5 million in interior renovations.

The Board of Representatives last week appointed seven residents — mostly people who had been serving on steering committee for the building — to the newly formed Old Town Hall Re-development Authority.

Officials over the years have discussed putting a hotel, museum, brew pub or art gallery there, but such plans haven't amounted to anything more than talk.

But before the summer ends, officials hope to solicit proposals from prospective tenants so the authority can firm up construction plans and cost estimates and start moving ahead.

The goal is to reopen the building with at least a portion for public use in spring 2008.

Authority members hope the plan they devise will incorporate

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a cafe or eatery, office space, and some type of exhibition space or museum that's open to the general public.

The tenants will be expected to cover the building's operating costs so it is not a burden on taxpayers.

"I would like to see it as a center of culture in downtown," said Downtown Special Services District Executive Director Sandra Goldstein, one of the seven members of the new authority. "There are number of rooms that lend itself to galleries, to historic museums, and rooms where you could hold public ceremonies and private ceremonies, such as weddings."

Rental income from professional offices on the upper levels could cover the operating costs, she said.

Graphic designers would be particularly interested because of the large amount of natural light pouring in, she said.

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"You can't have this as a drain on the taxpayers, so you have to make sure it's financible," Goldstein said. "You have to make sure the commercial part pays for the public part."

Rents are anticipated to be \$20 to \$25 per square foot for office space and \$30 to \$40 per square foot for retail space.

The building has about 20,000 square feet of leasable space.

City Rep. Annie Summerville, D-6, one of two Board of Representatives members serving on the authority, said it would make a good lunch spot for people working downtown, a passport office, an art gallery and possibly a satellite office for the Stamford Historical Society, which is housed in a former school on High Ridge Road.

It might even be a good idea to move the city's Cashiering and Permitting Office — which sells beach stickers and collects parking tickets fines — to the building, she said. The office is now located in cramped quarters on the first floor of the Stamford Government Center.

Summerville said she prefers that the building have a variety of tenants that serve different clientele.

"I think the whole building should be mixed use so everybody has reason to go there," she said.

From an operational standpoint, city Director of Operations Tim Curtin said the easiest approach would be to find a single tenant that shares the building with the public.

Curtin serves as the mayor's designee on the authority.

"Office space is the easiest thing," he said. "We've got a lot of good restaurants around town and I don't know if we need another one in there."

A restaurant would be a huge risk because many tend to go in and out of business quickly, he said.

Authority member Jim Nixon of the Urban Redevelopment Commission said there is no reason to add one more restaurant to what's becoming "restaurant row" downtown.

If a food vendor comes in, he said, it should be something unique and possibly appeal to health-conscious customers who want an alternative to fast food.

"I would look for something that's enough different that would be an addition and not just add more competition," Nixon said.

All that is needed is a small kitchen on premises so the atrium could be rented out for private parties that bring in their own caterers to generate even more revenue, Curtin said.

When the atrium is not rented, it could be used for public events, such as art exhibits and political activities, he said.

"Years ago, the front steps were always used for major political announcements — that's where everyone announced — and it could be used again," Curtin said.

Summerville said the grand staircase in the center of Old Town Hall would be the perfect spot for small, intimate weddings — much nicer than the Board of Representatives' legislative chambers, which are frequently used for informal ceremonies.

Harry Day, a city representative from the 13th District on the new authority, said his top choice would be to use the historic building as a museum.

The city might consider reapproaching the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, whose officials toured Old Town Hall five years

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ago and expressed interest in using it for rotating displays, Day said.

Board of Finance member Bob Kolenberg and former Speaker of the House Moira Lyons also will serve on the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Authority.

City Economic Development Director Michael Freimuth said the building's unusual layout — three main floors, a basement and a mezzanine built around a grand, open staircase in the center, is one of the biggest obstacles to finding suitable tenants.

Officials plan to post Old Town Hall's floorplan on the city Web site and ask prospective tenants to bid on a specific space.

Some minor interior modifications will be made to suit tenants and an addition with an elevator is planned for the rear of the building, but Freimuth said the layout is expected to stay largely the same to maintain the building's historic character. Depression-era murals that take up entire walls may be moved around the building but won't be removed, he said.

The city has spent about \$3 million in exterior renovations, washing the limestone facade, rebuilding the front steps and plaza and rebuilding the sidewalks, but has been putting off interior work until officials know what is going in there.

The exterior work is scheduled to be completed by early September.

By the time it opens, officials expected to spend about \$14.5 million on the entire project — most of which will come from state grants and selling tax credits to investors. The city's portion is estimated at \$3.5 million.

Downtown residents have been clamoring for years for a grocery store, but it's not a likely use for Old Town Hall.

Freimuth said any retail shops would be difficult at that location because of limited space for unloading merchandise and sign restrictions.

A museum would be particularly costly because the building would have to be outfitted with humidity and lighting controls, additional security and freight elevators that would raise the overall price, Freimuth said.

The building also lacks a parking lot, but officials say it shouldn't be a problem because there is abundant parking on the street, at the Bell and Summer Street municipal garages and in the Stamford Town Center garage — all within two-blocks.

"We've got to learn to walk a little bit in Stamford," Summerville said.

Soliciting bids is the fairest way to determine the fate of the municipal building but it's not the only way, Freimuth said.

"If not enough interest comes forward, we'll go out and seek it through a more traditional real estate brokerage firm," he said.