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Governing authority planned for Old Town Hall

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STAMFORD -- The Old Town Hall steering committee is expected to seek approval for a governing authority to oversee the management of the century-old building in the coming months.

Members of the steering committee, which is charged with refurbishing the building, said they have not discussed a governing body in detail but plan to during the next phase of development.

Similar to the Stamford Golf Authority, which governs Sterling Farms, an Old Town Hall authority would be separate from the steering committee and would have appointed members. The creation of the authority would ensure the city retained ownership of the building and veto power over all business decisions.

"There's no question that there has been discussion in establishing an authority to carry on the affairs of the building," said city Rep. Harry Day, R-13, who is on the steering committee. "I would say that that's probably likely that we would actually do that but there hasn't been a decision on that."

Financial agreements between the city and private investors require the establishment of an oversight board for the historic landmark.

Day said city ownership and public use are paramount, but it's been difficult doing both. An authority would be a vehicle to do that and ensure the building's future success, though residents probably won't be able to vote on the outcome of Old Town Hall, he said.

"I think we do represent the public sentiment for the building, which is most certainly to preserve and have it serve a useful purpose," he said.

To ensure ample funding for the building's renovations, the city plans to sign a management agreement with financial investors who will bring \$4.3 million in tax credits, said Michael Freimuth, Stamford director of economic development.

The entire restoration will cost about \$14.5 million. Restoration also is being paid for with \$6.3 million in state grants and \$1.4 million in city money. A \$390,000 contract with The National Development Council, a New York firm taking the lead in rehabilitation, was recently approved by the Board of Representatives and the Board of Finance.

During a finance board meeting last week, Freimuth said the steering committee was talking with a museum to use the building's public area. A restaurant and office space also have been mentioned. Board members weren't sure about any of the ideas.

"You subsidize something that has meaning in the city," board member Joseph Tarzia said at the meeting. "It should be a public building. That's what it was for 70, 80 years."

Freimuth said that may not be possible because the city needs revenue streams to manage the city's cost for maintenance, renovation and operation of the building.

"If we're able to do that with 100 percent public use we would love to do that, but it is somewhat doubtful that we are able to do that at this time," Freimuth said.

During the next phase of development, the steering committee expects to complete designs, identify building code violations, identify tenants and solicit proposals for interior renovations. A public comment phase has not been determined.

Built in 1906, Old Town Hall has been empty for nearly 20 years and neglected for much longer. It has soaring ceilings, stately columns, floor-to-ceiling windows, marble and terrazzo floors and an elegant staircase with an intricate wrought-iron railing.

Steering committee member Bill Warrick, a retired accountant and auditor, said he thinks a separate authority is needed to make sure the building is used appropriately.

"Old Town Hall has just been an eyesore and public nuisance," he said. "If we turn it into a bright spot in Stamford, everyone will benefit."