

Area News

Potential tenant eyeing Old Town Hall

City 'still dickering' over project costs

By Doug Dalena
Staff Writer

STAMFORD — The city hopes to have a tenant move into an expanded, renovated Old Town Hall by the end of winter next year, if it can complete construction, financing and a lease agreement in time.

The \$13 million project includes renovating the interior and building an ad-

dition to house elevators, new stairwells and public space. It involves leasing the upper floors as office space to a single tenant and reserving areas on the first floor for public use.

The city posted a request this week seeking contractors who can handle a complex renovation of a historic building. Once it screens potential bidders, who must submit their qualifications by July 17, the city hopes to solicit bids by October and start construction in December, said Jeff Pardo, a city engineer managing the project.

A prospective tenant wants to move in as soon the city can deliver the 1905

building, which Pardo estimates could happen in February, but only if there are no significant glitches in financing or construction.

"They're looking to get the building as quickly as they can," Pardo said. "This is about as quick and aggressive as we can deliver the building."

Economic Development Director Michael Freimuth has been negotiating with the potential tenant, whom he and other city officials would not identify, for several months on behalf of the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Agency, a public authority set up to administer the historic city seat and finance its renova-

tion and operation.

Negotiations were extended in April after the agency's board met in executive session for 90 minutes to discuss the potential lease, according to minutes of the meeting.

Freimuth said the negotiations are more complex than a typical lease because they require agreement on issues related to public use.

The terms of the lease must include provisions for public use of lower parts of the Beaux Arts building. The city spent millions restoring the exterior. The city and the redevelopment agency are requiring that some of the building

be available for community use, possibly a small museum, and a small restaurant or cafe on the lower level.

"There are issues of everything from security to operational costs to hours of operation," Freimuth said Wednesday.

The redevelopment agency wants the tenant to share the cost of operating the public spaces, adding another wrinkle to negotiations, he said.

Delivering the building on time depends on several other factors — securing federal tax credits that would finance much of the construction work, getting approval of the design for the

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TODAY

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Town Hall

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addition from state and federal historic preservation authorities who must sign off on tax credits for historic preservation projects, and getting construction bids to fit what Pardo and Freimuth called an extremely tight budget.

After making plans to borrow \$4 million from the city and leverage that to get another \$1 million in tax credits, there is not likely to be more money coming in, officials said.

"This project is maxed. We have gotten about as creative as we can," Freimuth said.

During the April meeting, Pardo told the board that architects and engineers have made changes to reduce costs without significantly altering the design. If the budget escalates because of unforeseen construction problems, increased oil prices or bids that come in higher than the estimate, some key features may have to go, he told the board.

Among the options, which altogether could save \$1 million, Pardo suggested changing the design of the glass wall that inclines toward the park, keeping the boiler instead of installing a modern one with more heating capacity, and replacing pre-cast concrete designed to look like limestone with white brick similar to that on the Bank Street side of the building.

Board members, however, don't favor the changes, officials said, and the designers have not studied whether the boiler can produce enough heat for the building and expansion or looked at how to redesign the glass wall.

"The general feeling of a number of us on the board is that we shouldn't cut anything," Freimuth said. "If we're going to do

the job, we should do it right."

But if eliminating a new boiler makes the difference between restoring the building and putting off the project, he would recommend tanking the boiler, Freimuth said.

"At this stage, we're still dicker and considering what we're going to do," said Tim Curtin, chairman of the redevelopment agency's board.

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