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Preserve options for Old Town Hall

July 29, 2004

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Few 24,000-square-foot buildings in downtown Stamford have been as difficult to occupy as the Old Town Hall. But few have been as close to residents' hearts as this nearly 100-year-old pantheon of Stamford history, which served as the hub of municipal government for decades. It's good that basic repairs are being made to the Old Town Hall while officials continue to search for an appropriate use for it.

Last week, state lawmakers led by House Speaker Moira K. Lyons, D-Stamford, announced that \$3 million to restore Old Town Hall would be on the agenda when the state Bond Commission meets next Friday. Total renovation costs have been estimated at \$20 million or more. But the \$3 million is necessary now to do such essential work as rerouting drains to reduce basement flooding. The Bond Commission is expected to approve the funding.

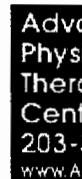
Little by little, basic repairs have been made in recent years to this 1906 Beaux Art-style building as a hedge against deterioration. The roof has been replaced and upgraded to accommodate air conditioning. The limestone façade is being cleaned and refreshed, and replacement windows compatible with the architecture are being installed by the city.

This is substantial progress. Five years ago, some wondered whether neglect would doom the Old Town Hall to the scrap heap.

But more than cosmetic progress is necessary. The Old Town Hall has another life to live. It should become an active part of the Stamford community again.

Everything from a federal passport office or children's museum to a five-star hotel has been suggested for the Old Town Hall since municipal offices moved out in 1986. All failed for various reasons, most related to high renovation costs. Mayor Dannel Malloy said the city plans to create a for-profit or not-for-profit entity that would qualify for federal tax credits to help finance historic preservation of the building. The mayor says the city would continue to control the Old Town Hall under such an arrangement. It's an intriguing idea that could help the city clear a huge financial hurdle. But the question of how the Old Town Hall would be used remains.

The options are as limitless as the imagination. It's easy to envision a bride descending the Old Town Hall's grand staircase at a wedding reception, with families renting part of the building for that purpose. The historic murals would form a terrific backdrop for a small museum or other repository. It's a natural place for community meetings, assuming parking issues can be overcome. Some retail or office uses may make sense, as well, although we believe that at least part of the building ought to be reserved for general public use.



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Without basic repairs, however, nothing will be possible. Residents ought to be pleased that this work is being done and look toward a new life for the Old Town Hall.