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Stamford's Old Town Hall Faces Developers

By JACK CAVANAUGH

IN Stamford, where landmark buildings have been demolished by the hundreds over the last two decades and replaced by an eclectic array of corporate office towers, the Old Town Hall in the heart of downtown has seemed sacrosanct: a striking Beaux Arts structure gracefully bespeaking the city's past and apparently exempt from unending urban renewal.

But as years passed and the Old Town Hall sat unoccupied and deteriorating, following the move of municipal offices to other buildings a decade ago, city officials began wondering what to do with Stamford's architectural crown jewel. Committees were set up by several mayors, including the incumbent, Dannel P. Malloy, but none was able to come up with viable suggestions, or tenants, for the grand old building.

Meanwhile, in Greenwich and Norwalk, town halls of the same vintage as Stamford's 1906 stone structure were converted into multipurpose use. In Greenwich, the 95-year-old former town hall on Greenwich Avenue, in the heart of the business district, has thrived as an arts and senior center, offering space to work in galleries, to dance or play musical instruments in studios or to play checkers or cards. In Norwalk, the 86-year-old Colonial revival-style red brick former town hall was recently converted into a museum, although it also has a commercial tenant.

Now Stamford officials are mulling over a proposal: a developer plans to build a 13-story, \$200-a-night hotel atop the Old Town Hall. It is a proposal that Mayor Malloy, a Democrat, seems to think may have some merit, as does the local newspaper, *The Advocate*, but to which many Stamfordites have reacted with alarm and outrage.

Even Don Russell, a longtime broadcaster and columnist in Stamford, who has, by and large, supported the city's transformation into a corporate mecca, has drawn a figurative line in the sand in the case of the Old Town Hall. "There are some things that are sacred to natives and longtime residents, such as parkland and, yes, the Old Town Hall," he recently wrote in *The Advocate*.

Similar sentiments have been expressed in letters to the editor of *The Advocate*. Comparing the proposal to the demolition of the old Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan more than three decades ago, Joseph Gatto Jr. of Stamford, wrote, "Stamford is on the verge of creating its own historic blunder, selling the Old Town Hall, having it converted into a luxury hotel and wiping out a piece of Stamford history forever."

In response to such negative comments, Stephen D. Julius 3d, the Stamford real estate developer involved, has said, "What's wrong with putting up something that will accommodate 264 bodies in a building that nobody's been in for 11 years?"

Mr. Julius, who is the president of Proteus Group LLC, explained in an interview, "Here we are, willing to restore the building at a cost of more than \$6 million and then create more than 300 jobs in the hotel itself, along with generating other business for downtown Stamford."

Under his proposal, his company, in conjunction with Madison Equities, a Manhattan-based developer, would build an upscale hotel "that would be a major contributor to the city's tax base while removing a potential financial drain." In exchange for doing the necessary restoration, Mr. Julius said, his company and its associates in the venture would want to operate the hotel rent-free for three years. Initially, he also proposed reduced real estate taxes during that period, but that idea was abandoned.

Though the hotel would be designed for an affluent clientele, Mr. Julius said downtown employes and other Stamford residents would be welcome to use the hotel's restaurants, bars, meeting rooms and other rooms. "We might even put a museum in the basement where traveling art exhibits could be displayed," he said. "And of course the hotel could be used for wedding receptions and other functions."

Mayor Malloy, who recently began a second term, did not return telephone calls about the hotel proposal. But in response to the hotel proposal and one for a brew pub and restaurant (which has since been dropped), the Mayor has been quoted as saying, "The Old Town Hall has been closed for approximately 10 years and life will be brought back to one of our most historical landmarks located in the core of our downtown."

Not many Stamfordites seem to think that the Old Town Hall with its majestic style -- spiral staircase and striking Depression-era murals on the interior, clock tower, plaza and semi-circular staircase on the exterior -- should be brought back to life with a hotel atop it.

"The negative public reaction has been the greatest to any proposal made since urban renewal began," said Renee Kahn, a dedicated preservationist and the director of Stamford's Historic Neighborhoods Preservation Program. "There's been this great sense of outrage, and I don't think the proposal has a snowball's chance in hell."

Others are equally vociferous. "Profit is what has driven all of the redevelopment in Stamford," said Ralph Loglisci, a Republican and the minority leader of the Stamford Board of Representatives. "Everything's done to maximize profit and in the process we have failed to save a lot of historic buildings in town. And building a hotel on top of the Old Town Hall is a terrible idea. If the people of the city chose to save the building, we can do so. Like some other reps, I'm getting a lot of calls on this, and they're all against the hotel idea."

Another representative, Maria Nakian, a Democrat, said she is getting a similar reaction, from constituents and members of the Board of Representatives, which can kill the proposal since the Old Town Hall is city property.

"The consensus among the members is not to approve the hotel proposal," said Ms. Nakian, who is chairwoman of a 12-member committee from the Board that is studying the proposal and is to give a report to the full board tomorrow. "The Old Town Hall is prime real estate and should be used for community purposes," she said. "We should not let the building be caught up in a commercial venture."

Ms. Nakian said that the hotel proposal could be killed by any one of three city boards: planning, finance or representatives. "I doubt very much if it will go through," she said.

Mr. Loglisci and Ms. Kahn were among a group including several city representatives who toured the old Norwalk City Hall, now the Norwalk Museum. "Everyone was impressed with what they've done," said Ms. Kahn, an art historian. "And look what they've done in Greenwich. There's no reason why Stamford can't do the same, or even more."

In Greenwich, the upper two floors of the 93-year-old former town hall, now known as the Greenwich Senior/Arts Center, were renovated at a cost of about \$125,000, all of which was privately raised, according to Betsy Jordan Hand, the executive director of the center.

Meanwhile, almost \$235,000 in Federal funds were used to put in a fire alarm system and renovate the lower level and first floor, which serve as the senior center. That money was obtained through a Federal Community

Development Block Grant, which provides benefits for low- and moderate-income people, says Nancy Brown, the Greenwich Director of Community Development.

"We're totally self-supporting," Ms. Hand said of the Greenwich Arts Center. "There's always something going on in the building. And we have a waiting list of artists and sculptors who want to lease space, which has to be done for at least a year."

Ruth Sims -- the Greenwich First Selectman from 1978-1981 credited with proposing and fostering the transformation of the hall -- said:"It was one of the major issues I ran on. And the building has been a great success.

"It's a perfect solution with what to do with a functional and attractive old building. And it's benefited the entire town."

Ms. Kahn, the Stamford preservationist, said, "We have an even more attractive building than Norwalk and Greenwich, and it's right smack in the heart of downtown.

"An expensive hotel on top of our beautiful Old Town Hall is certainly not the way to go."