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 Pollen forecast
 Traffic
 Trains

Tenants sought for Old Town Hall

By Joy L. Woodson
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STAMFORD – Old Town Hall needs a few good tenants.

After months of cleaning and discussions about renovation, a steering committee charged with refurbishing the century-old building wants to begin looking for tenants for 24,000 square feet of usable space. The committee of city representatives, engineers, developers and architects wants the public to have access to the building.

The National Development Council, based in New York, is taking the lead in finding tenants. Director Matthew Wexler said a public art house and office space are possible. The public portion of the building would occupy half of the first floor and the mezzanine level. A private company would occupy the other half of the first floor and parts of the second floor, he said.

"The tenants that we want to draw to this building are the tenants who appreciate the history of the building and what it has to offer," Wexler said in a committee meeting yesterday.

The entire restoration would cost about \$14.5 million. Restoration is being paid for with \$6.3 million in state grants and \$1.4 million in city capital money. The committee also expects \$4.3 million in federal tax credits for historic renovations, said Michael Freimuth, Stamford director of economic development. There will be some costs for constructing a modest addition for a stairwell, elevators and bathrooms, he said.

Committee members said they plan to go to the Board of Finance and Board of Representatives with a request for about \$380,000 to begin marketing and designing how the space will be used. Over the next six months, the committee expects to secure public tenants and get the word out about the project.

"This project is feasible," Wexler said. "We need to get some momentum going right now."

The building at Bank, Atlantic and Main streets stands at the city's historic center, on the spot where nearly all the town halls have stood since Stamford

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- Computer & Technology
- Investing

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was founded in 1641. It was constructed at the intersection of ancient Indian paths and the site of the Colonists' first meeting house.

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.

Crews have finished cleaning the exterior, including patching the limestone face and replacing windows. Inside, asbestos tiles and lead paint were removed, said Jeff Pardo, construction manager with the city engineering department. The exterior doors need to be replaced, he said.

Moira Lyons, former speaker of the state House of Representatives, helped bring funds for the restoration project to the city and sits on the committee. She said she is most concerned with preserving the space for Stamford residents, who feel connected to the building.

No matter what tenants are chosen, "you can still make it in keeping with what we feel is the historic value of the building both outside and inside," Lyons said.

Committee member Bill Warrick, a retired accountant and auditor who has lived in Stamford since 1982, said he's glad to see good things in store for the building. It has been an eye sore for too long, he said.

"It's magnificent, just a real, real special building," Warrick said.