

The ADVOCATE

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Editorial

Value public's links to Old Town Hall

Stamford has some way to go before the historic Old Town Hall opens its doors to any organization. Interior renovations estimated to cost \$11.5 million are anticipated for the 101-year-old Beaux Arts building, and the city does not have a clear sense of what its tenants or use ought to be. But while the merits of including a retailer, restaurant, office or other commercial user inside are discussed, Stamford residents have arrived at a broad but very definite consensus about what the next chapter ought to hold for this beloved building.

Their view? Don't shut out the public. Open at least part of the Old Town Hall to residents so we can reclaim this city treasure.

To that end, the newly formed seven-member Old Town Hall Redevelopment Authority is preparing to solicit proposals for the building from potential tenants. The city will continue to own the Old Town Hall, but the authority anticipates renting about 20,000 square feet of space. Floor plans are to be posted on the city's Web site, in hopes that potential tenants will bid. Should that approach fail, the city might use a more traditional

The Issue:

Regard for treasured historic building should be reflected when future use is determined.

real estate brokerage firm.

Some first-rate ideas have surfaced, many from longtime residents who once visited the Old Town Hall to register to vote or get a marriage or fishing license. It's easy to envision The Old Town Hall's grand staircase as a backdrop to intimate family weddings or private receptions. Putting a popular government function in the building to draw visitors in and show off the Old Town Hall — a passport office or small office to issue Stamford beach passes — is another idea. A museum has been mentioned many times. Bringing the Stamford Historical Society, now in another city-owned facility on High Ridge Road, is a natural, because the Old Town Hall was the apex of municipal life for generations of Stamford families. But installing rotating exhibits from some of the region's top art museums, such as the Wadsworth

Atheneum in Hartford, is another approach that has been explored.

Who goes in will be determined in part by how easily existing space can be occupied. The Old Town Hall is such a repository of Stamford's past that even some of its walls are historic, so city officials want to keep changes to a minimum. Depression-era murals on the walls might be moved, but will remain inside the building. Large interior spaces are few and some users that ordinarily might bid for them could find the floor plan unworkable.

Funding is another consideration. Total costs, including recent repairs and the renovation, could approach \$14.5 million. Most of that money could come from grants and tax credits that a redevelopment authority could sell to investors. But Stamford's share could be \$3.5 million. Raising private funds might be relatively easy, given the warm feelings so many residents have for the Old Town Hall.

It's gratifying, though not surprising, that so many residents have such affection for this building. They ought to remain engaged in the process so the next phase of life for the Old Town Hall is as grand and vibrant as those before.