

The ADVOCATE

<http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/opinion/editorial/scn-sa-editorialsep20,0,2148183.story?coll=stam-editorial-headlines>

What's acceptable for Old Town Hall?

September 20, 2006

Exhibit One: the Old Town Hall's grand staircase -- By now, most Stamford residents accept that concession, as well as commitment, is required if the city is to breathe new life into the much-beloved Old Town Hall. The city can't afford to renovate the 101-year-old Beaux Arts building and hand the keys to a museum or worthy nonprofit organization, as much as many in the city might like that to happen.

But how far residents will compromise to maintain some portion of the building for the public is a recurring question. It came up again this month at a meeting of the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Authority, which is making plans for the building. It also should be a factor in Monday's public presentation on potential plans for the Old Town Hall. The meeting begins at 7 p.m. at the Stamford Government Center.

Ideally, a mix of private tenants to help pay operational costs and some public use is envisioned. But marketing the building to private tenants without making substantial physical changes to attract them is a challenge.

probably its most dramatic and memorable feature. Decades ago, residents went up and down those steps numerous times to register to vote, sign up for military service, get a fishing or marriage license or pay their taxes. But the staircase is smack in the center of the building and takes up an awful lot of real estate -- space that otherwise could be rented for as much as \$40 per square foot, according to one estimate. Move these or other stairs to another part of the building, and the Old Town Hall might attract an opera house, theater or banquet hall.

The grand staircase also is an obstacle to 21st-century building standards. Architects propose a 2,000-square-foot glass addition on the back of the Old Town Hall, facing Heritage Park, to accommodate modern bathrooms and an elevator that would enable access by wheelchair-users and others with physical disabilities.

No one so far has recommended the staircase be removed. Even the suggestion seems unlikely. It's too difficult to imagine the Old Town Hall without the staircase. It defines the building as much as the Depression-era murals that adorn some of its walls. The staircase also is an important backdrop to one of the most popular ideas mentioned for the renovated building: a site for wedding receptions.

But the staircase also illustrates one of the biggest problems the city has in moving the project ahead. Private tenants are not willing to commit without some idea of what the space will be used for or look like. And the city doesn't want to say yes to nonprofit users that would get space at reduced rates until it has firm commitments from paying customers.

Stamford is working on the project. The city has cobbled together a \$14.5 million plan to renovate the Old Town Hall. The city and state are contributing most of the money, with about \$6 million to come through private

500,000 Mortgage
for Under
\$999/Mo!
Think You Pay Too Much For Your Mortgage? Find Out!

CLICK YOUR STATE
Alabama

CLICK YOUR RATE
3.00% - 3.99%

CLICK CREDIT TYPE
Good

Lower MyBill.com

donations and the sale of tax credits to investors. Extensive exterior work already has been done on the building, and the redevelopment authority is working on next steps.

But a lot of difficult decisions lie ahead.