

Thursday, November 18, 2010

# Gavel to gavel

## Auction next on courthouse's docket

Jan. 19 is judgment day for the Worcester County courthouse. That's when the once lively building at Lincoln Square goes on the auction block.

Some might say the massive old courthouse will have a hard time making a case for itself with potential buyers. There are maintenance matters related to its age and design dilemmas created by its size. And there's the need for a buyer who has not only the wherewithal to convert the courthouse to a new use, but imagination without which no amount of money will help.

The building, on a prime parcel, does have a certain solid beauty, with graceful notes throughout. Mark H. Shear, president of Berman Auctioneers & Appraisers, which will run the auction, indicated the property has caught some eyes.

Locally, the proceedings will of course be watched closely. The building is across the street from the city-owned Worcester Memorial Auditorium, which officials are moving toward putting on the market after years of maintenance payments and underuse. Both impressive structures hold long stretches of city history and civic activity in their halls. Not only that, by their location and architecture they command the attention of residents, visitors and travelers passing through the busy intersection.

The auction of the state-owned, 180,000-square-foot building is being coordinated by the state Division of Capital Asset Management. Potential bidders must show they can finance a project of more than \$10 million, and must also have architects or firms with experience in historic preservation on their teams.

A college or university might be able to make use of the building, or it could possibly be turned into housing or some kind of a cultural venue, according to Timothy J. McGourthy, Worcester's director of economic development. Deborah S. Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, likes the idea of a school purchasing the property, and told the Telegram & Gazette that maintaining public access to the old courthouse building would be a plus.

The 1950s-era, 70,000-square-foot annex at the back of the building could be removed as part of whatever's next for the property. That section is utilitarian in appearance and expendable, in comparison with the Greek Revival-style front, with its wide steps, tall columns and stake on Main Street dating to the 1840s.

The courthouse has been largely empty since the Worcester Trial Courts center opened nearby on Main Street in 2007.

It's sad to think of the forgotten files, tattered carpets and cobwebs gathering dust in a building that once hummed with the work and worries of justice in action: gavel taps,

briefcase clicks, quick footsteps, anxious looks, oaths, arguments, decorum, decisions.

One more verdict remains. It's of immense interest to many observers to see who gets the keys to the courthouse.