

In Our Opinion
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Decision hour
Clock Tower may have one last chance

For the last several years, Preservation Worcester has led a determined but thus far unsuccessful effort to persuade state officials to commit to some plan to save the historic Worcester State Hospital Clock Tower. That effort reaches a critical stage this week. To judge from their latest report on the property, state officials now appear to be committed to demolishing the iconic clock tower, and hope to complete that process by about the time the new hospital opens this year.

Preservation Worcester and its allies have two chances left to muster the support they need — a request for support from the City Council Tuesday night, and a meeting with state officials at a site visit on Thursday.

It would be unfair — and fiscally unwise — for Worcester officials or local legislators to seek millions of dollars in additional funding to stabilize and preserve the Clock Tower at this time. But neither is there any pressing need for the state to proceed with demolition before Preservation Worcester has had every opportunity to explore ways to save the structure, perhaps through a combination of private, corporate and charitable sources.

Constructed in 1877, the Clock Tower is, as Preservation Worcester points out, a prime example of Victorian-Gothic architecture, and has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1980. Whatever the financial and political realities involved, its demolition would be a loss for Worcester's architectural portfolio.

Yet officials with the state Division of Capital Asset Management have made clear they believe that the Clock Tower and remaining, surrounding portion of the former administration building lacks architectural integrity, and that its rehabilitation and reuse are not financially feasible.

It has been 20 years since the 1991 fire that ravaged the bulk of the former hospital's wings. In that time, the state has proceeded with construction of a new, \$302 million mental health facility. DCAM's plans for the Clock Tower site range from a garden to some kind of monument marking the tower's location.

Deborah S. Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, points out that her organization has worked for the last three years on the basis of a 2008 state draft that left open the possibility of saving the Clock Tower, only to see the latest, fuller plan move in the direction of demolition, while estimated costs for stabilizing and preserving the Clock Tower have increased by many millions of dollars.

Nonetheless, she said, there may be sources of funding for preservation. On Tuesday, Preservation Worcester will ask the City Council to endorse a mission statement to "preserve the

original Worcester State Hospital Clock Tower... reflecting dedication to the care of patients with mental illness and as a monument of hope in advancing improved understanding...”

Of course, expressions of interest and support don't save structures, dollars do, and it will take lots of them to save the Clock Tower in any form. But once gone, this important piece of Worcester's history will be gone forever. We urge state officials to slow down and give the community every opportunity to make their case for the Clock Tower, before it passes into history.