

Thursday, January 26, 2012

Preservation group backs off tower fight

By Lee Hammel TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Preservation Worcester has agreed there are compelling reasons to take down the historic clock tower at Worcester State Hospital and then rebuild it.

Preservation Worcester Executive Director Deborah Packard said Tuesday that her organization would agree to the state's approach providing the 1877 tower is "reconstructed to a standard that replicates the current clock tower" in a timely fashion. Preservation Worcester had wanted to preserve the tower by leaving it in place but that would cost two to three times the \$2.5 million project cost and double the one-year of the state Division of Capital Asset Management's preferred option of replication, DCAM project manager Charles Willse said.

In a letter to U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, DCAM Commissioner Carole Cornelison said that preservation in place also presents life-safety risks to workers and technical feasibility challenges.

In a draft memorandum of agreement, DCAM proposes dismantling the clock tower portion of the administration building by a restoration subcontractor and storing and cataloging the stone elements to allow the clock tower to be rebuilt to its current height in its same general location. The Massachusetts Historical Commission agrees there is no feasible alternative to demolition of the building and its clock tower.

DCAM hopes to have a signed memorandum of agreement around Feb. 13.

Mr. Willse said that ideally demolition would start March 1 after going out to bid and it should take a year or less from design to rebuilding. He said DCAM has the money in its budget.

Under questioning at a stakeholders meeting Tuesday, Mr. Willse said he did not know that it would be possible to place each stone in its current position. Peter B. Schneider, Worcester Historical Commission member, called it the difference between "having something look the same and be the same."

Having failed to save the clock tower as is, Susan M Ceccacci, education director for Preservation Worcester, asked DCAM what its plans are for the Hooper Building and Hale Building, which she called "the last two survivors" of the 135-year-old hospital making way for the Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital that will open this year.

Although she said that DCAM will be in charge of maintenance of those buildings, Carol C. Meeker, DCAM deputy general counselor, said the agency cannot make a commitment now regarding their future. They are already mothballed, she said.

Mr. Willse said DCAM prefers to reuse them rather than leave them vacant or knock them down.

Mr. Willse said that state Department of Mental Health staff members have already been training in part of the new hospital building. Although DMH said earlier this month it expects to move in patients in July, Mr. Willse said he expects it to be August.