

Monday, November 15, 2010

This old courthouse

BUILDING, LAND SET FOR AUCTION IN JANUARY



H. Peter Norstrand, left, deputy commissioner for real estate services for the state Division of Capital Asset Management and Ron Bowen state electrician check out the patterned ceiling in the foyer of the main entrance of the old courthouse. (T&G Staff Photos/CHRISTINE PETERSON)

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Former Worcester County courthouse

- **Address:** 2 Main St. and 5 Highland St.
- **Land:** 4.47 acres
- **Space:** 180,000 square feet
- **Original construction:** 1843-45
- **Distinction:** Listed on National Register of Historic Places
- **Auction:** Jan. 19
- **Minimum bid:** \$100,000
- **Bidder requirements:** Must be able to raise more than \$10 million in financing

Source: Berman Auctions;
"Worcester's Best, A Guide to the City's Architectural Heritage,"
prepared by Preservation Worcester



The exterior of the old courthouse.

The old Worcester courthouse may be the single largest building the state has ever tried to sell.

Photo galleries

WORCESTER — At the northern end of Main Street sits the city's ultimate fixer-upper.

Paint peels from interior walls. Ceiling tiles display the telltale brown stains of past water leaks. In some places, well-meaning but ugly renovations have left old fluorescent bulbs, not sunlight, showing through skylights.

But officials responsible for finding a new use for the former Worcester County courthouse say the 180,000-square-foot complex at Lincoln Square also has its attributes: grand rooms with massive windows, graceful metal work and a certain flexibility.

“It takes vision,” H. Peter Norstrand, deputy commissioner for real estate services for the state Division of Capital Asset Management, said of the challenge ahead for the building.

Largely empty for the past three years, the former courthouse is due to go on the auction block Jan. 19. State officials began escorting potential bidders through the shuttered complex last month.

To bid, interested parties must show they can finance a project of more than \$10 million. They must also include architects or firms with experience in historic preservation on their teams. The opportunity, according to the state's description, lies in the chance to “adaptively reuse” the courthouse.

That's what city officials want, too.

“Bottom line, we think it's a great building, a historic part of that urban fabric that makes up that location, and we want to see someone who has the wherewithal to capture the essence of the building,” said Timothy J. McGourthy, Worcester's director of economic development.

First built in 1843-45, the courthouse is actually two buildings. The 110,000-square-foot granite building facing Main Street is of a Greek Revival design that started with a structure at the southern end of the façade. It underwent additions in 1878 and 1898-99. A 70,000-square-foot annex was built across the rear of the building in the 1950s.

By the end of the 20th century, however, the complex was cramped and dated. Court activities moved down Main Street in 2007 to a new Worcester Trial Courts center. A law library moved out last year.

The long history of the old complex shows in the architecture and decor. The former law library in the older building features metal bookcases with egg-and-dart detailing, and a mezzanine constructed with glass floors.

Honey-toned wood paneling in the annex courtrooms give the newer addition a mid-century “Mad Men” feel. One of the annex courtrooms still bears fake clocks and a faux FBI medallion from the movie “Surrogates,” which turned the room into a futuristic office for filming in 2008.

Off courtrooms throughout the complex lie dark holding cells for prisoners and rooms with tattered carpets that once served as judges' chambers. Cobwebs show on desks where court officers formerly observed trials. Old papers still sit in pull-out metal files lining the walls of a room on the top floor of the old building.

The complex is cold now and unlighted. Mark H. Shear, president of Berman Auctioneers & Appraisers, which will run the January auction of the property, hands out flashlights for a tour.

“We do have interest,” Mr. Shear said, though he declined to talk about who has been touring the building.

The market will dictate the redevelopment of the courthouse, according to Mr. Norstrand. That might mean demolishing part of the complex, he said. Mr. McGourthy said some interest in the courthouse has focused on using it for housing or for college, university or cultural uses.

Under the best circumstances, a school would take over the old courthouse, said Deborah F. Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, an organization devoted to preserving significant sites and buildings. Maintaining public access to it would also be positive, she said.

“Just maintaining it makes it prohibitive for some people to consider,” Ms. Packard said. “There's been quite a bit of talk of taking down the most recent addition, and we would not have an issue with that. And that really opens up that property quite a bit. It increases space in the back of the building that someone could use.”

The state has experience selling unused properties for redevelopment. Former state hospitals have become housing. The old Chestnut Hill pumping station in Newton has become the Waterworks Museum.

But the old Worcester courthouse may be the single largest building the state has ever tried to sell. There's no room to think that the auction won't draw bidders, Mr. Norstrand said.

“We can't have that thought enter our minds,” he said. “There are going to be people who want this property. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”