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Time running out for Worcester State Hospital clock tower

By Lee Hammel TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — It appears the last gasp has escaped from those hoping to save the Worcester State Hospital Clock Tower.

The state secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs has decided against requiring an environmental impact report on a plan to demolish the 135-year-old High Victorian Gothic style tower, making way for the Worcester Hospital and Recovery Center to open this year. The state Division of Capital Asset Management has offered to compromise by saving and cataloging the rubble from the tower and reconstructing a replica on the same site.

Secretary Richard K. Sullivan Jr. ruled Friday that review of the environmental notification form for the DCAM-Department of Mental Health project “has served to adequately disclose the potential impacts associated with this project. Based on review of the ENF, consultation with relevant state agencies and a review of comment letters, I find that no further Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act review is warranted.

“I am confident that the development of appropriate mitigation for historical resources will be addressed adequately through the Massachusetts Historical Commission consultation process.”

“I think it’s over,” Deborah Packard, Preservation Worcester executive director, said last night.

Preservation Worcester had dropped its hope of saving the entire five-story administration building of which the clock tower was part, and pushed restoration of only the tower, which extends one-and-a-half stories over the 52,000-square-foot building.

Ms. Packard said the decision is what she expected, especially after the MHC saw no alternative to demolition, but “I think it’s a really sad situation that the building has been allowed to be demolished by neglect.”

She added, “I do think that having the monument is a good thing for the city to commemorate the treatment of mental illness in the country,” whether it’s restored or replicated.

The City Council approved a resolution Jan. 3 against demolition of the clock tower. Last night, Mayor Joseph M. Petty said he was disappointed by the state’s decision, but congratulated Ms. Packard and Preservation Worcester for fighting for what the council thought was a good plan.

A meeting will be held today with Preservation Worcester, the Worcester Historical Commission and members of the state’s project team. The meeting was planned Jan. 6, when Preservation Worcester asked the state to come up with figures for the cost differential between preserving the tower and replicating it.

Still on the agenda is discussion of restoration, as well as arriving at a memorandum of agreement, project timing, the proposed design process and lighting of the tower.

The new psychiatric hospital will replace the 54-year-old Bryan Building, the only Worcester State Hospital building with patients, with employee training scheduled to begin in March or April and patient occupancy slated for July. State officials have said the state building inspector has warned that the clock tower will have to be either fully stabilized or demolished before the new hospital can be occupied because they are about 151 feet apart.

The 110-acre campus of the hospital, which once stretched 275 acres to Lake Quinsigamond, is on the state and national registers of historic places.