

Tower site clings to life

FUTURE UNCLEAR FOR STATE HOSPITAL LANDMARK



The historic Worcester State Hospital Clock Tower building still has an uncertain future. (T&G Staff/TOM RETTIG)

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The new Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital is seen in the foreground with the Worcester State Hospital Clock Tower building at right. The UMass Medical complex is seen in the background. (T&G Staff/CHRISTINE PETERSON)

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-- Deborah Packard, PRESERVATION WORCESTER

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WORCESTER — The effort over the past couple of years to rescue the historic Worcester State Hospital Clock Tower building from the wrecking ball has rallied many to the cause.

For example, at least 600 messages of support have been sent to a special Facebook page and about 150 people have signed an online petition to save the Gothic-style structure from demolition.

Local preservationists said they are buoyed by the response, but they're not sure state officials have been convinced that the five-story, 52,000-square-foot building is worth preserving.

“I think we're running out of time,” said Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester.

She said state officials have not put out development requests as they had long promised to do.

The state Division of Capital Asset Management had commissioned GLC Development Resources, in association with Feingold Alexander & Associates and VHB Inc., to consider development options for the structure, along with the nearby Hooper Turret building.

In 2008, GLC issued a draft proposal that looked at the possibility of retrofitting the building into an office or residential complex. They also examined the option of converting the Clock Tower into a conference center or lodging facility that would be owned by a nearby institution such as the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

At the least, GLC reported, the building could be stabilized for \$3,380,000.

The study said that Worcester is growing and a Clock Tower project could latch on to the many biotechnology ventures operating nearby.

It noted that the structure's proximity to the medical school and UMass Memorial Medical Center is a selling point, but cautioned that the area's weak housing market might hamper development efforts.

Since the draft, little else has been concretely done by state officials to move any possible project forward, the preservationists said.

Preservation Worcester has had three meetings with state officials over the past several months. The last was on July 27 and was attended by DCAM Commissioner Carole Cornelison and Department of Mental Health Commissioner Barbara Leadholm.

DCAM officials did not return telephone calls seeking comment.

Ms. Packard acknowledged that redevelopment efforts were dealt a setback when the U.S. National Park Service ruled that the Clock Tower, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, did not qualify for federal tax credits.

Developers sell the credits to investors to raise equity and capital in their projects.

In rejecting the structure's eligibility, federal officials said there's not much left of the original hospital complex and the alterations at the 110-acre site, basically the construction of a new \$302 million psychiatric hospital, no longer convey a historic sense of the parcel.

In its report, GLC said federal tax credits, along with state tax credits and ample parking, are needed to make a project possible.

"Even with the loss of the credits, we still think a project is possible," Ms. Packard said.

She said that through Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray's efforts, a meeting is being arranged between Preservation Worcester and James Leary, the medical school's vice chancellor for government and community relations.

However, Mark L. Shelton, associate vice chancellor for communications at the school, stressed that the medical school isn't and won't be involved in any proposed development of the Clock Tower building.

But the school is very much interested, he said, in knowing how neighboring real estate is and will be utilized.

Mr. Shelton said the medical school wants to learn more about Preservation Worcester's ideas

about the Clock Tower building during the meeting between the nonprofit and Mr. Leary.

“It's a great location, but anybody looking to do anything with that building is going to need some deep pockets,” Mr. Shelton said.