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Vote enables restoration plan for historic Fire Dept. building

By Nick Kotsopoulos TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Plans to restore and redevelop the historic Fire Alarm & Telegraph Building in Elm Park cleared an important hurdle last night.

The Conservation Commission unanimously approved the disposition of the building and about 3 acres of adjacent park land, as well as a change of use of the property. With that action, the city now has a green light to file special legislation needed to allow the sale of the building to Spencer Savings Bank.

The legislation will also allow for the long-term leasing (70 years with options) of up to 3 acres of adjacent park land to facilitate the sale of the building to a private developer and the required site development, including the construction of a parking lot for the bank and the park.

Without the unanimous vote of the Conservation Commission, the city would not be able to pursue the special legislation, according to Joel J. Fontane, director of the city's Planning and Regulatory Services Division.

The Fire Alarm building, at 230 Park Ave., was constructed in 1925 and once served as the central relay station for the city's fire alarm system.

After the Fire Department abandoned its use of the building, the School Department stored maintenance equipment there for many years. The building has been vacant for several years and fallen victim to neglect and significant deterioration, according to Heather Gould, senior project manager for the city Office of Economic Development.

The 6,735-square-foot, two-story English Tudor Revival-style brick building is on the National Register of Historic Places and has been identified by Preservation Worcester as one of the city's "Most Endangered Structures."

An agreement was reached a few months ago among the city, Spencer Savings Bank and Preservation Worcester to preserve and renovate the building.

The deal provides for the transfer and disposition of the building, as is and at no cost, to Spencer Savings, which will establish a retail banking office on the building's second floor.

Preservation Worcester will lease most of the first floor, which will contain community space and related amenities. Preservation Worcester will manage the spaces in the building for community use.

Commissioner Paul Franco said he had reservations about authorizing the disposal of three acres of park land for conversion into retail use without seeing any definite development proposals or plans for that area.

But Commission Chairwoman Stefanie Wood emphasized that the commission's vote is simply to set into motion the filing of special legislation needed for the project. She said the commission is not approving any particular development scheme or any particular parking lot plan.

She added that the Conservation Commission will likely have the opportunity to review the full development plans once they are completed, along with the Historical Commission, Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals.

"We are not wiping our hands of the matter; we're just basically starting the process," she said.