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Worcester historic Fire Building gets new life
Public, private funding

By Nick Kotsopoulos TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

WORCESTER — The historic Fire Alarm and Telegraph Building in Elm Park, the victim of neglect and significant deterioration over the years, is on the verge of getting a new lease on life through a public and private partnership.

City Manager Michael V. O'Brien said an agreement has been reached among the city, Spencer Savings Bank and Preservation Worcester for the renovation of the 6,735-square-foot, two-story brick building at 230 Park Ave.

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, meanwhile, 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.

Mr. O'Brien said Spencer Savings will finance the entire building rehabilitation except for the first-floor community space, for which local foundations will contribute \$275,000.

He said the bank will completely renovate the building to historic standards.

The city will also contribute \$100,000 for environmental remediation of hazardous materials within the building.

In addition to work on the Fire Alarm building, Spencer Savings will also upgrade the traffic signalization at Park Avenue and Elm Street to a four-way signal with pedestrian sequencing.

The bank will also provide a parking lot next to the building that will be for business and public use.

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Mr. O'Brien said the project will meet every community goal that had been set for the property, including private historic restoration, public access to a community space, and getting it on the city's tax rolls.

“This unique public/private partnership achieves all our goals for the revitalization of this beautiful historic structure while recognizing the fiscal limitations of the city, both in the short and long term, and the threat of imminent loss of this resource,” Mr. O'Brien said.

“Due to this partnership between the bank and Preservation Worcester, I have consulted with Mass Audubon, the Greater Worcester Land Trust, the Friends of Newton Hill and others,” he added. “I am pleased we have reached this milestone.”

Mr. O'Brien emphasized the entire community will be fully engaged in the process going forward to secure all the necessary approvals.

Because public parkland is involved, Mr. O'Brien said, the city will have to receive authorization from the Legislature through a home-rule bill to be able to lease the building to Spencer Savings and have the building used for commercial purposes.

The Fire Alarm building, constructed in 1925, is on the National Register of Historic Places and has been identified by Preservation Worcester as one of the city's “Most Endangered Structures.” It 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. Also, the city stored many records from the former City Hospital on the building's upper floor.

The condition of the building has deteriorated so badly that trees are growing into its foundation and out of its roof.

Sources close to the negotiations indicated the historic renovations and site work would cost approximately \$3.5 million.

Consultants two years ago estimated that it would cost more than \$1 million just to bring the building up to code and another \$400,000 to add parking and an elevator.

In addition to turning the property over to Spencer Savings at no cost, the deal calls for:

- Designating parking and public access to trail heads for Newton Hill.
- Allowing the construction of a remote ATM on the site with a storage facility that will be allowed for storage of park-related equipment and materials by the Friends of Newton Hill. The city will add a city-owned storage facility elsewhere on Newton Hill.