

Worcester Telegram & Gazette
Wednesday, October 12, 2016

204-year-old Stearns Tavern in Worcester ready to move on

Posted Oct 12, 2016 at 7:08 PM Updated at 6:02 AM



Phil Niddrie, left, special projects coordinator in the office of the city manager, and Gary Sylvester, of Sylvester Building Movers, stand near the Stearns Tavern at 651 Park Avenue on Wednesday. The building is up on blocks and ready to move to Mill Street on Tuesday. T&G Staff/Christine Peterson



The 204-year-old Stearns Tavern, up on blocks is prepared for the move to Mill Street next week. T&G Staff/Christine Peterson

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WORCESTER - History will be on the move Tuesday.

After months of planning, preliminary work and site preparation, the historic Stearns Tavern, one of the oldest structures in the city, is about to be taken on a half-mile trek from Webster Square to its new home at the site of the former Coes Knife factory building on Mill Street.

That site is being turned into a four-season, multi-generational park and universally accessible playground, with the Stearns Tavern building to serve as one of its focal points. The Seven Hills Foundation will eventually occupy the first floor of the building, where it will operate a café and other programs.

The move will be done by Sylvester Building Movers Inc. of Falmouth and is scheduled to get underway at 9 a.m. Tuesday, according to Philip J. Niddrie, who has been coordinating the relocation project for the city.

The 204-year-old, two-story building, which has been separated and uprooted from the foundation at its long-time home, at 651 Park Ave., will be hauled away in two sections for its short trip down Park Avenue and then on to Mill Street to the Coes Pond site.

The sections will be temporarily staged there then rolled onto the new foundation that has already been built, according to Gary Sylvester, owner of the moving company.

Mr. Sylvester said if all goes right, the move could be done within an hour.

He said his company is working with the utility companies to address overhead wire issues along the route and with police, which will have to redirect traffic around the route while the building is being moved.

He said his company, which was founded by his father in 1954, has experience in moving historic structures. He said it is considered one of the premiere building moving companies in New England and takes great pride in helping preserve the historic value of any structure.

“Every building we move is a little different,” Mr. Sylvester said in an interview Wednesday. “Depending on how a building was built, we have to adapt to it in our planning. We don’t see problems, just solutions.”

The city has agreed to spend \$150,000 in federal Community Development Block Grant money to have the building moved.

But most of the overall cost for the project is actually being funded through in-kind donations that have been made by a number of companies and organizations.

Plywood Plus of Worcester, for instance, was the latest company to step forward, agreeing to donate all the wood and materials needed to put new sills on top of the new foundation.

Mr. Niddrie said the city has so far received in-kind donations from 38 private sector firms, five nonprofit organizations, two labor unions and two utility companies, totaling nearly \$501,000 in value.

In addition, two layers of government - city and state - have been associated with the project. In total, 66 people have been involved with the project, prompting comparisons to an old-fashioned barn raising.

Mr. Niddrie said City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. played an important role in getting companies and people to volunteer their services or make other in-kind contributions by publicly stressing the importance of the project to the city and its history.

“None of this would have been possible had it not been for all those who have come forward with their in-kind donations, both large and small,” he said. “The small ones are just as key as the larger ones because they helped us at some very critical times to get a job done.”

It's actually the second time that Stearns Tavern is going to be taken for a ride, so to speak.

Built in 1812 by Charles Stearns, the building was originally located at 1030 Main St. It opened as a tavern and later operated as a hotel by Joseph Curtis and was a stagecoach stop for people traveling through the city.

Starting in the 1920s, the building was home to a variety of other businesses, including a furniture shop in the 1950s and a carpet store in the 1960s.

In 1974, the structure was moved to 651 Park Ave. where it was turned into a bank. Various bank branches operated there and those banks owned the building.

When its last tenant, Bank of America, vacated the building in May 2013, ownership reverted to Salloom Realty Corp., which owns the land the building has sat on.

The fact that the building is not only still around but will be moved to a new location is a testament to city officials and local historic preservationists.

The building narrowly avoided a 2014 date with the wrecking ball when Salloom Realty sought permission to raze the building.

But the Historical Commission refused to grant a waiver to the city's demolition-delay ordinance, which puts a one-year hold on the razing of historic structures.

During that one-year delay period, an agreement was reached to transfer ownership of the building to Preservation Worcester.

Mr. Augustus then subsequently reached an agreement with Preservation Worcester to relocate the tavern and eventually have the Seven Hills Foundation occupy the first floor of the building.

Once the building, is moved, the city will take over its ownership.

Thanks to the unprecedented amount of commitment to saving and relocating Stearns Tavern, Mr. Augustus said year-round programming, recreation and workforce training will be able to be provided to those who have been underserved for so long, and one of the city's oldest buildings will also be saved in the process.

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