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Worcester County Courthouse rehab gets green light



The Historical Commission has given the developer of the former Worcester County Courthouse a green light to proceed with a \$53 million project to convert it into 1114 apartments. [T&G File Photo/Christine Hochkeppel]

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WORCESTER - The Historical Commission has given the developer of the former Worcester County Courthouse a green light to proceed with a \$53 million project to convert the building to 114 apartments.

The commission Thursday night unanimously granted Trinity Worcester Development LLC a waiver to the city's demolition delay ordinance so it can work on the exterior of the historic courthouse building at the north end of Main Street.

The courthouse was built in 1843, with additions constructed in 1878, 1898 and 1955. It consists of about 250,000 square feet and is located on 4.28 acres at Main and Highland streets.

It has been vacant since 2008.

Work to be done includes replacing all 313 windows, replacing selected doors, cleaning and restoring granite masonry and installing a handicap-accessible ramp.

Because the former courthouse is listed on the Massachusetts Cultural Resources Information System and on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Institutional District, it is subject to the demolition delay ordinance, which puts a one-year delay on the razing of historic structures or changes made to their exterior.

To avoid the one-year delay, Trinity Worcester Development, a subsidiary of Boston-based Trinity Financial, petitioned the Historical Commission for a waiver.

Michael Lozano, senior project manager with Trinity Financial, said all the windows in the courthouse complex need to be removed and replaced because they are rotting after years of neglect.

Only about 50 percent of the windows in the courthouse buildings are believed to be original.

In addition, Mr. Lozano said, all the windows are suspected of having PCB caulking. For that reason alone, he said, they are unsalvageable.

"They are beyond saving," he said.

Because the developer intends to seek federal and state historic tax credits for the project, Mr. Lozano said the type of replacement windows selected will receive scrutiny from the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the National Park Service to make sure they closely replicate the historical nature and appearance of the existing windows.

Mr. Lozano said the courthouse project will be predominantly residential, though he added there will likely be a small amount of other space that is arts-focused, such as galleries.

"There will be no traditional retail," he said.

Andrew Shveda, chairman of the Historical Commission, praised the developer for the attention detail to maintain the envelope of the courthouse and extend the life of the building.

He said he was also impressed that no new openings will have to be made to the exterior of the courthouse building.

And the statue of Gen. Charles Devens statue will remain in front of the courthouse.

Given the scope of the project and the condition of the existing windows, Mr. Shveda said he had little problem with having them removed. He added that oversight by the Massachusetts Historical Commission and National Park Services will ensure that appropriate replacement windows are selected.

Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, said the organization “truly supports” the project and believes it will be great for the city.

She said if the developer had to repair all the windows instead of replacing them, the project would probably become economically nonviable.

W. Stuart Loosemore, general counsel and director of government affairs and public policy for the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, also spoke in favor of the project. He said the developer has shown a commitment to preserve the historic nature of the building while repurposing it for housing.

“This level of investment and repurposing this property will increase the density and vitality of downtown Worcester, helping continue its transformation into an 18-hour downtown,” Mr. Loosemore said. “Additionally, this development will bring a large property onto the tax rolls, increasing the city’s tax base.”