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Worcester Historical Commission OKs addition to Stearns Tavern

By [Nick Kotsopoulos](#)
Telegram & Gazette Staff

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WORCESTER - The Historical Commission has given a green light for the construction of an addition to the historic Stearns Tavern at Coes Park.

The addition, which will be built in the rear of the two-story, 205-year-old building, will have two sets of handicapped accessible restrooms - one that can be accessed from the interior of the building and another from the exterior, according to Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester.

She said the exterior restrooms will have public access when the building is closed. Three windows will be added to the building as part of the project, she added.

Because the addition involves an alteration to the exterior of a historic structure, Preservation Worcester had to apply for a waiver to the city's demolition delay waiver, which puts an automatic one-year delay on razing historic structures or altering their exterior.

The Historical Commission unanimously approved the waiver request, meaning that work can proceed on the addition.

Stearns Tavern, one of the oldest structures in the city and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was moved to 140 Mill St. at Coes Park last fall from its previous home at 651 Park Ave.

The relocation is a joint effort involving Preservation Worcester, the city and the Seven Hill Foundation, which will eventually occupy the building. The Seven Hill Foundation provides services and programming for people with disabilities.

Ms. Packard and Philip J. Niddrie, who has been coordinating the relocation effort for the city, said the project has received more than \$800,000 worth of in-kind services, materials and grants from 64 businesses, nine nonprofit groups, four labor unions and three levels of government - city, state and federal.

Commission Chairman Andrew Shveda said Stearns Tavern is an example of how the city's demolition delay ordinance has saved a historic structure from the wrecking ball.

The building narrowly avoided demolition in 2014 when its previous owner, Salloom Realty, sought permission to tear it down. The Historical Commission denied the waiver request, providing more time to find alternative uses for the building.

During the one-year delay, an agreement was reached to transfer ownership of the building to Preservation Worcester. City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. subsequently reached an agreement with Preservation Worcester to relocate the tavern and eventually have the Seven Hills Foundation occupy the first floor.

“This is another great win,” Mr. Shveda said of the saving of Stearns Tavern. “This will liven up a section of Worcester that has been neglected in a way.”

Stearns Tavern is going to be the centerpiece of the 4.37-acre Coes Park, a new multigenerational park that features a universally accessible playground. It will have year-round programming, recreation and workforce training for people with disabilities.

Mr. Niddrie said it is hoped that Stearns Tavern will be ready to open next spring. In addition to the addition, he said, much interior work needs to be done.

The City Council recently authorized the city manager to seek \$400,000 in grant money from the state Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development’s MassWorks Infrastructure Program for the Stearns Tavern renovations.

The city originally requested a \$100,000 grant in December 2016, and the City Council has increased the amount of the request to \$400,000.