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Politics and the City: Worcester's Lincoln Square hits daily double, goes for trifecta

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Overshadowed by all the hoopla surrounding the Pawtucket Red Sox moving to Worcester, in conjunction with the planned \$240 million redevelopment of the Kelley Square area, is what is happening at the north end of downtown at Lincoln Square.

It is something that has the potential of being transformative for that part of the downtown, while also preserving three historic and architecturally significant buildings.

A major gateway to the downtown, Lincoln Square has long had the unique distinction of being home to three white elephants: the former Worcester County Courthouse building, the former Lincoln Square Boys Club building and the Worcester Memorial Auditorium.

All three buildings have been vacant and been long-neglected for years, and their futures appeared uncertain at best if not downright hopeless. As hard as the city tried to come up with plans for the redevelopment of those buildings, it got nowhere with them.

Not only were the properties not generating any tax revenue; worse yet, the city has also had to spend money to maintain those buildings each year.

But it appears that the pieces to the Lincoln Square puzzle are finally beginning to fall into place.

Last year, Trinity Financial of Boston purchased the former courthouse from the city and intends to invest \$55 million to convert the Lincoln Square landmark into 114 units of affordable and market-rate housing.

The building has been vacant since 2008. Construction is supposed to begin this winter with a target completion date in the summer of 2020.

Adding to that good news, it was announced last week that WinnDevelopment Co. has conditionally agreed to buy the old Boys Club building for \$300,000.

Winn intends to do a \$20 million historical renovation of the property and convert it into the new home of Summit Academy, a therapeutic school for alternative students with high-functioning autism and related diagnoses.

Preservation Worcester is also a limited partner on the project, and through the group's efforts and stewardship it has been able to secure Massachusetts Historic Tax credits worth millions of dollars to help underwrite the cost of the project.

Without those tax credits, the project would likely not be feasible.

The iconic Boys Club building, which at one time used by Worcester Technical High School when it was located at Wheaton Square, has been vacant for some 10 years.

Prior to Winn coming on board, four other companies had taken a crack at redeveloping the Boys Club building but ended up walking away because they found it far too costly and limited as to what can be done with it for adaptive reuse.

The redevelopment of the courthouse and Boys Club building is a double win for the city. Not only will it no longer have to continue paying to maintain them, but those tax-exempt buildings are now going to be added to the city's tax rolls.

"I do think this a good deal for the city," City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. said last week of the pending sale of the Boys Club building. "We've had three major public buildings at Lincoln Square that have been empty for many years. None of which were on the tax rolls, all of which were costing the city to money in terms of our carrying costs, removing snow, managing the buildings and keeping the security of those buildings intact.

"They're all three historic buildings," he added. "We've had a lot of discussion about how important our architectural heritage is and the integrity of some of our historic structures. We've now got two of those three buildings that are going to be going on the tax rolls for the first time, saving the historic structures and adding to the vitality in the downtown area."

So, two of the three white elephants appear to be on their way to being taken care of. That leaves one - perhaps the most difficult of the three - Worcester Memorial Auditorium.

And there are even some signs of hope for the building as well.

The Boston-based historic preservation group that has been conducting an in-depth feasibility study for the redevelopment of the historic city-owned building is working with Becker College on exploring potential reuses for it.

Sean McDonnell, president of the Boston-based Architectural Heritage Foundation, said Becker College approached AHF in midspring expressing an interest to partner with it in redeveloping the auditorium. He said the college subsequently signed an agreement with AHF to work together on the project.

Becker has broached the idea of using part of the Lincoln Square landmark as a cutting-edge, interactive media, technology and arts center. It would support content creation, streaming, competitive gaming and online production, and include an eSports venue as well as collaboration, education, design and development facilities.

"(Becker) came to us with this idea," Mr. McDonnell said. "They have taken a broad-minded approach to this and we are thrilled at the prospect of working with them on this. Becker seems to understand this a very good opportunity for them and they want to get it right."

The auditorium, which is more than 80 years old, has been vacant for nearly 20 years and fallen into disrepair.

The cost to renovate the building just to bring it back to a "useful life" has been pegged at about \$50 million.

"It's a formidable task that we think can be worthwhile," Mr. McDonnell told the Worcester Memorial Auditorium board of trustees last week. "But this project won't be successful without a number of other partners. Ideally, this would be something that could be attractive to all the colleges in Worcester. We want to make this a success for everybody in the city and not just Becker College."

AHF will be providing the city with a report early next year on the feasibility of renovating the auditorium and how the project could be paid for.

But at least there is some hope and things are looking much better for the Lincoln Square area compared to as recently as a couple of years ago. It is hoped that all three white elephants will eventually become extinct.

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