

Council subcommittee endorses sale of former Boys Club building to WinnDevelopment



A rendering of the former Boys Club building at Lincoln Square after renovations and rehabilitation.

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WORCESTER - The City Council Economic Development Committee on Tuesday night unanimously endorsed the recommendation of City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. to sell the former Lincoln Square Boys Club building to WinnDevelopment Co.

WinnDevelopment has agreed to pay \$300,000 for the city-owned property at 16 Salisbury St. The building has been vacant for roughly a decade, during which time its condition has deteriorated considerably.

The developer intends to historically renovate the building and then lease it to Summit Academy, a nationally recognized leader/provider of education, professional services and support systems for youth and families that face the challenges of high-functioning autism, according to Michael V. O'Brien, executive vice president of WinnCompanies and former Worcester city manager.

He said WinnDevelopment is looking to take title to the building in December, provided a structural integrity analysis shows it is feasible to rehabilitate and renovate.

Work on the \$20 million redevelopment project is scheduled to begin in the first quarter next year. The goal is to complete the project and have it ready for occupancy by Summit Academy by July 2020, he said.

The redevelopment team includes Cutler Associates of Worcester as design/build experts. In addition, J.J. Bafaro, mechanical contractors, and Mercer Electric will be part of the redevelopment effort.

In addition, WinnDevelopment is partnering with Preservation Worcester on the project. Through the group's efforts, it has secured Massachusetts historic tax credits worth millions of dollars to help underwrite the cost of the project.

Mr. O'Brien said the goal is to have 50 percent of the contractors and subcontractors working on the project coming from within 30 miles of the Lincoln Square site.

Michael E. Traynor, the city's chief development officer, said several attempts have been made to redevelop the building during the past 10 years, but none succeeded. He said WinnDevelopment has been working on the project since October 2014 and has come up with a path forward for the building's preservation and reuse.

Mr. Traynor said time is of the essence for preserving the building because it is reaching a "point of no return." He said there has been a lot of water infiltration into the building and its condition is "pretty dire."

"We want to make sure it doesn't get too far gone to be saved," he said.

Mr. O'Brien echoed that sentiment, saying the building is likely to be lost if actions to save it are not taken now.

"The exterior shell of the building is in very poor condition and it is deteriorating," he said. "Four previous efforts were made to redevelop this building, and while they were valiant efforts there were no real solutions until today. With the support of the city manager and chief development officer, this building will be historically saved. But time is not our friend."

The proposal was widely supported, though a representative of the Worcester Community Labor Coalition said his group would like to see conditions included in the sale that ensure that local workers have an opportunity to work on the project and are paid a living wage.

Kevin Ksen, speaking on behalf of the community group, said the exact same framework that was included in the conveyance documents by the city when it sold the former Worcester County courthouse should be included as conditions for the sale of the Lincoln Square Boys Club building.

He said the city needs to have a consistent community benefits policy for all projects that involve tax-relief deals or those involving public property.

“We support this project, but our concern is with the process,” Mr. Ksen said.

District 2 Councilor Candy Mero-Carlson, committee chairwoman, said there are several things that she and her colleagues would like to see included in the deal. But she added that time is of the essence for the building and the project must move forward now.

The three-member committee’s recommendation will go before the entire City Council for its consideration on Nov. 13.