

Rochester group aims to save old grain elevator

Condo developer will let historical society have the building, but it must be relocated by end of the year.

By Joe Menard / The Detroit News

Friday, June 17, 2005

ROCHESTER -- For nearly 100 years, area farmers brought their produce and grains to the Rochester Elevator to be ferried by train to Detroit's markets.

But as subdivisions replaced farmlands and the freight trains vanished, so did the need for the big red grain elevator. After the Michigan Central rail line ceased operation in the 1970s, the building was converted to an agricultural supply store.

Now, the downtown icon faces its final challenge for survival, as historical preservationists try to save it from the wrecking ball.

"It has been, in my opinion, a downtown icon in Rochester for a long time," said Greg Doyle, president of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, which hopes to save the relic and move it to a new location. "It has a pretty interesting history to it."

Developer Roy Rewold has offered the building to the society on the condition it is relocated by the end of the year. Rewold, along with Sunrise Senior Living, plans to build a \$20 million, four-story building with retail shops and 60 to 70 senior condominiums on the site.

Rewold -- whose family's company built many of the area's best-known buildings including the Rochester Hills Public Library, Stoney Creek and Rochester Adams high schools, Rochester College, Crittenton Hospital and the Palace of Auburn Hills -- said he understands the significance of the building and its history, which is why he offered it to the society.

"All they have to do is figure out how they're going to do it," he said.

But moving the more-than-125-year-old building will not be a cheap or easy task, Doyle said.

"All told, it's probably going to be a few hundred thousand dollars to do this. We're going to need help from the community," he said. "It's a pretty good-sized building. It really needs to be a cooperative effort."

Experts have already deemed the building safe to move, Doyle said, and the society is getting cost estimates for the relocation. In addition to moving costs, the society will have to buy land for the building to move to, unless somebody donates it.

Officials at the Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm have already said they don't want the building, though they agree it should be saved.

"We don't want to become the depository for historical buildings in Rochester," said Dave Harrell, the museum's educational program coordinator. He called the building Rochester's last link to its agricultural roots.

"That is really one of the most historical buildings in the community," he said. "Once that building's gone, there's very little left to remind us that we were an agricultural community."

Resident Al Reidinger, who occasionally shops at Rochester Elevator for water softener and natural gas, said the building is a reminder of the town's old railroad days.

"It's a part of Rochester the older people really remember," said Reidinger, 69. "It's an icon within the town here."

The developers are testing the site for industrial contamination and may apply for tax breaks to cover any clean-up costs, said Laura Hester of Sunrise Senior Living. She hopes to have the project completed in two to three years.

It would become the latest in a string of condominium projects near downtown Rochester that city leaders hope will invigorate the business atmosphere and revitalize the slumping local economy. Already more than 200 new condominium units are expected to open in the next year.

"I think as far as the downtown is concerned economically, that fits in our strategy to increase foot traffic," said Carol Gardner, executive director for the Rochester Downtown Development Authority.



Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News

Greg Doyle, president of the Rochester Avon Historical Society, hopes the community will get involved in the group's effort to relocate an old grain elevator.

At issue

The Rochester-Avon Historical Society wants to save the Rochester Elevator and move it to another location in the Rochester area. The society is seeking donations to help cover the cost of moving the barn-type building, which is expected to cost more than \$100,000. It also is looking for someone to donate land for the relocated building. For information or to help, call (248) 651-3468 or (248) 651-6178.