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Article published Apr 9, 2006

Elevator's future coming into focus

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Though to many it might look like a rundown old barn that's seen better days, the Rochester Elevator is on its way to a new life.

The elevator is on track to be moved June 17 from its present location on East University at Water Street to vacant, city-owned land a short distance south next to the Clinton River Trail. The effort is being undertaken by the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, which is moving the building because the present site is about to be redeveloped.

On March 30, Rochester-area residents with an interest in the elevator's future met to discuss its possible future uses. Society president Greg Doyle said a lot of ideas have been coming forth.

"A big part of this is going to be developing a vision statement around ... blending the historic with basically revenue-generating opportunities," he said. "One of the things we have to be concerned about is paying for the overhead and not being in a situation where we have to go raise funds for overhead."

That approach seems workable to Doyle, who has a broader vision of the elevator as part of a historical walking trail through Rochester and Rochester Hills. He thinks the elevator can be made a pedestrian amenity for trail users as well as a link to downtown, a place for historical interpretation and an attractive meeting or office space.

"It would be nice if we could also, while we generate revenue on that building, have the exhibits, have the elevator portion of the building viewable, be able to demonstrate how that works," he said.

No costs have yet been established for adapting the structure for reuse or for future operating costs.

It's possible that as fund-raising continues, the renovated structure might only be open seasonally at first.

"We really need to get a better idea on what our yearly costs are going to be," Doyle said. "Ideally we'd have a nice facility there that we could rent out space, it would pay for the overhead and we'd have space for some exhibits."

The new location, adjacent to the south Main Street bridge, has been surveyed and soil borings have been done. Doyle is hopeful the findings will support a basement, which would add more usable space.

According to the historical society, in 1880 the Griggs Elevator was built at Water and East University. In 1909, it was joined by the Newberry Elevator, an 1872 structure that was moved to the site. Together they served local farmers who brought their grain for storage and eventual shipment by train to market in Detroit.

When the railroad era ended in the 1970s, the building was converted to an agricultural supply store.

A television production company has expressed interest in filming the elevator's move down Water Street. Fund-raising efforts are continuing. For more information, visit the Hold the Elevator! Web site at <http://home.comcast.net/~holdelevator/>
