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Article published Jul 9, 2006

Historic building may not move after all Condominium plans dropped; push on for city to buy Rochester Elevator site

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Now that the sale of the Rochester Elevator property at East University and Water Street has fallen through, an alternate plan to turn the site into a town square is gaining support.

Sunrise Development has withdrawn its proposal to build senior-citizen condominiums on the property and is no longer interested in purchasing the land, according to a memo from Rochester City Manager Ken Johnson to the Planning Commission.

He said the decision was "based on the market conditions in southeastern Michigan."

The change of heart cancels the company's offer to donate the elevator building to the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, which was planning to move the landmark, barn-like structure to a vacant, city-owned lot near the Clinton River.

Rochester Councilman David Becker, who opposed Sunrise's development plan, has been floating the idea of creating a town square along East University, using an existing parking lot and the elevator site. The elevator could then remain in its historic location and become the focal point of the town square.

Last week, Becker said Sunrise's decision to pull out "is a great step forward for Rochester. I really believe that. I think Rochester's future economic viability lies in keeping our charm, our quaintness and our nice human feel. That means architecture built to human standards."

PRICE TAG

A recent study of the downtown's east side suggests a town square on the block bounded by Water, East, East University and Fourth. The block currently includes a parking lot and several homes and businesses. City records put the combined market value of the block at \$2.5 million.

"I've been told by two real estate people \$4 million is more reasonable," Becker said. He suggests the city or Downtown Development Authority could acquire the elevator property instead.

"The start is to obtain the site," he said. "If we can put the park there, start putting away money. And if we can't, turn the property over. Leave the elevator, if not where it is, leave it downtown."

Historical Society President Greg Doyle said he loves the idea.

"To have the building there as part of a town square ... I think would be wonderful," he said, suggesting it could be used for the farmer's market in colder months, a food court and other amenities.

Doyle said the society is considering seeking historic designation for the elevator and is working with a consultant to find grant money.

"We're planning to be intimately involved in the restoration on site," he said. "Our whole perspective of this is preserving the building. It would be hard to figure out a way that wouldn't happen at this point."

The society is still moving forward on site-plan approval for the alternate location so it will be ready to go, whatever the future holds.

"It's had an awful lot of twists and turns, hasn't it?" he said. "But we continue marching forward."

Councilman Jeff Cuthbertson said he also likes the new town square idea, which won't force anyone to move involuntarily.

"I think it's worth exploring," he said. "I think there may be another location to tie into the park, based on some of the west

area design discussions. But I think it's considerably better than what's been proposed."

WHAT'S NEXT?

Lawrence Smith, owner and operator of the Rochester Elevator, said Sunrise's decision to walk away was a blow to him. He wouldn't disclose what the agreed-upon selling price was, but said the numbers Becker is mentioning are in the ballpark for acquiring his property.

"If they'd like to come forth I think they should," Smith said. He said he expects there to be other interest in the land.

Becker said he's not ready to formally present his idea to City Council but has been speaking to fellow council members individually.

"Good ideas always tend to percolate to the top in this city," he said. "I think this is one of them that with enough information, thinking and financial wherewithal we might be able to accomplish."

PARKING DECK CHANGE

A proposed parking deck on Water Street will also be re-evaluated in light of the Sunrise withdrawal, developer Roy Rewold told the Planning Commission Wednesday.

During a public hearing on his proposal to build a deck on the northern part of the Rochester Mills building parking lot, Rewold said he will probably come back with a larger deck encompassing the building's entire parking area.

The original parking deck proposal was to serve the Sunrise condos and the Mills building, which is home to a restaurant and office suites. An expanded deck would incorporate the parking needs of an as-yet undisclosed development Rewold is working on for vacant land south of the Mills building.

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