

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

WE COVER WHAT MATTERS...EVANSTON

Tuesday, August 03, 2010

1817 Church St. - Even If This Is the Right Place, Is This the Right Building?

By Mary Helt Gavin and Anna Sanders

Tuesday, August 03, 2010

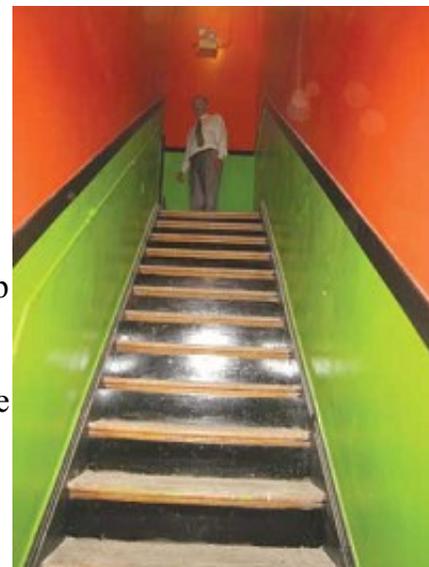
Not all of the representatives of the owners of the property at 1817 Church St. are sure that the building, with its brick and limestone façade, wrought-iron grillwork and tall windows should be saved from demolition. Some, however, say they believe that the property would be a good site for the long-discussed African-American cultural center.

The City of Evanston owns the property again, having repossessed it in the fall of 2007 from the Evanston Westside Citizens District Council. The group purchased the property from the City for \$1 and received \$200,000 in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding for redevelopment into a cultural facility that included a museum and technology center to serve primarily the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods and contribute to the revitalization and redevelopment of the Church-Dodge neighborhood business district, said Sarah Flax of the City's Department of Community and Economic Development, in an e-mail response to questions from the *RoundTable*.

Under a separate agreement with the City, the group agreed that the City could reclaim the property if the museum were not established and opened in a timely fashion. Although the group spent about \$175,000 of the CDBG funds, the property was "reclaimed by the City in the fall of 2007 because the facility was not open to the public according to the terms of sale, and the public benefit required based on the investment of federal funds had not been accomplished," Ms. Flax said.

The building has been closed since then, and about all that remains of their efforts of the Evanston Westside Citizens District Council are the murals above the fireplace, on the hall floor and on the outside back walls of the building.

Many City Council members appear to be committed to establishing an African American cultural center there.



A steep climb for Second Ward Alderman Lionel Jean-Baptiste and others who participated in a walk-through of the property at 1817 Church St. City officials say they hope the building, a local landmark, can be redeveloped as an African-American cultural center.



Mold is growing on at least one of the interior walls at

AMERICAN-AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER THERE.

1817 Church St.

"I don't see foundational issues. ... I don't see extreme water infiltration," Alderman Lionel Jean-Baptiste, 2nd Ward, said at a walk-through of the building last Thursday, July 29. He added the City should try to make the building have a "function in the community."

"We're still committed to the concept of a cultural center," Alderman Delores Holmes, 5th Ward, said at the walk-through.

"I would like the physical space utilized for some type of community center," said Alderman Don Wilson, 4th Ward. On the other hand, he is "very skeptical that the building can be saved."

But with mold growing on at least one inside wall, an electrical system and chimney of uncertain safety and functionality, and no handicap accessibility, the building – some aldermen and the mayor say they fear – is beyond rehab.

Major Elizabeth Tisdahl said she believed the City should look at what the rehab would cost before making a decision. However, she said "I think it is impossible to renovate this in any financially reasonable manor."

Alderman Ann Rainey, 8th Ward, said they should look at "what can be done, what can be saved" of the building.

The three-story building is spacious on the bottom floor, which takes up nearly half of its 4,000 square feet. Since the building is not ADA-equipped and the stairways are steep, an elevator would be required, some of the aldermen said.

So far, none of the responses to the City's requests for proposals (RFPs) has been satisfactory.

"The first RFP for 1817 Church S. was released in September, 2009, with proposals due at 2 p.m. on Nov. 10," said Ms. Flax's e-mail response. "No responses were received by the deadline; a proposal submitted after the deadline was returned unopened, following City policy. The RFP was re-issued in January 2010 with a due date of March 16 at 2 p.m. One submission was received."

Shortly afterward, the Economic Development Committee requested City staff to issue another request for proposals for creating a cultural center there.

This new RFP, said Ms. Flax, stated, "The City of Evanston seeks the redevelopment of 1817 Church Street to include the establishment of a cultural center or facility that promotes cultural awareness and understanding." The language did not limit the redevelopment to a single purpose, nor did it limit responses to those from not-for-profit organizations. "For-profit developers were encouraged to submit proposals," she said.

In the meantime, said City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz, City staff will inspect the property, assess the condition of the electric wiring and the chimney, ascertain the source of the mold, mow the weed patch and address safety concerns about materials falling from the building onto the sidewalk. He said the City should "button up the outside" and "move forward to do that immediately."

Related Links:

">Content © 2011

">Software © 1998-2011 **Iup! Software**, All Rights Reserved