

## **Look at the Facts**

### **It's Time to Save Cook County Hospital**

Cook County Board President John Stroger recently released a \$1.4 million consultant study that calls for the demolition of the former Cook County Hospital Building. By itself, that is hardly surprising news. Stroger has long indicated his desire to see the old building razed, if only to provide a clearer view of the new hospital that is named for him.

What *is* surprising about the study—at least for those willing to wade through its two volumes—is the large amount of information that actually supports the reuse of this majestic landmark structure, which dates from 1912. For example:

- The consultants found that there *is* a critical need for office space for the county's medical staff, as we had suspected when our own *pro-bono* consultants prepared reuse plans for the building nearly two years ago. In fact, the demand for office space—which never had been identified by the county's planning staff—would more than fill the existing 360,000 square feet in the former hospital building.
- The former hospital building is very well-suited for office uses, both in its layout and in the structural soundness of its steel-and-concrete frame. In fact, the report found that the building's existing floors would support nearly double the expected floor loads of any proposed reuse, including office space.
- Retention of the original hospital, as well as the construction of a new building for clinical and office space, would not exceed the open space or floor area limits imposed by the city's planned development agreement with the Illinois Medical District. This is a point we had argued to largely deaf ears—and staunch denials—prior to the release of the report.
- The monthly cost for maintaining the historic building is \$29,000. While this is a considerable amount, it is far less than the \$500,000/month figure previously thrown about by the proponents of demolition—again, as we have long contended. This amount could be further reduced if other vacant buildings with monthly maintenance were demolished now, while still planning for the conversion of the former main hospital.

Unfortunately, the consultant's study neglected to mention a few other key facts that also would support the reuse of this irreplaceable historic structure, including:

- In October 1994, the building was determined “eligible” for the National Register of Historic Places by the state agency responsible for making those recommendations to the federal government. However, actual listing never occurred because the owner of the property needs to consent to National Register listing. Also, it remains no surprise that Cook County Hospital has never been nominated as a Chicago Landmark, since it's hard to imagine the City Council

voting in opposition to the long-expressed desires of the Cook County Board President to demolish the structure.

- The report concludes that a rehabilitation scheme would cost \$11 million more than a new construction alternative. But those figures are inflated, since they also include a large new addition. Furthermore, the study fails to consider one of the most valuable tools in the historic preservation toolbox: federal rehabilitation tax credits. Based on the study's rehab estimates, this incentive could produce \$12.6 million for a private developer, provided the county created the type of sale-leaseback arrangement that is common at many other levels of local, county, and state government. The fact that the county already leases other nearby medical-related buildings to private and nonprofit entities also was not reported in the study.
- The study also mixes apples and oranges in its comparisons between rehab and new construction costs. The more relevant analysis is far simpler: What would it cost to rehab the 370,000-square-foot former hospital building versus the construction of a new structure of the same size? Given the still-spiraling costs of new steel and concrete (compared to saving those same materials in the old building), rehab would cost from \$4 million less to an equal amount as new construction. However, the estimated \$3 million cost to demolish the historic hospital would be saved. In addition, a rehab project would produce more local jobs than new construction, which spends a greater percentage of its budget on building materials manufactured elsewhere. Finally, a rehabilitation plan will deliver this office space quicker than new construction, especially given the other competing needs of the hospital complex, including an expensive new parking garage.

The impetus for preparing this master plan was the controversy over the proposed demolition of the Old Cook County Hospital. We applaud the county for commissioning this study, which has illuminated many more facts than were available just a year ago. But we urge the County Board to look beyond the report's recommendation to see what will be best for the users of the hospital, its medical staff, and—perhaps most of all—the taxpayers.

In our opinion, that decision remains simple. Save and reuse the Cook County Hospital Building.

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10/2005