

Preservationists make plea for Will County Board to repurpose rather than demolish former courthouse

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Hudson Hollister with Will County Courthouse Preservation Partnership, wearing a shirt that has a picture of the “World’s Ugliest Courthouse,” urges the county board to explore all options before demolishing the former courthouse. (Michelle Mullins / Daily Southtown)

An organization hoping to preserve and repurpose the former Will County Courthouse in Joliet has received proposals from six firms with developers, architects and engineers that specialize in historic preservation with potential ideas for the Brutalist style building.

Officials with Landmarks Illinois and the Joliet-based Courthouse Preservation Partnership said suggested reuses include converting the vacant courthouse, which was built in 1969, into housing, offices, a hotel or using it for educational, arts or cultural opportunities.

However, Will County Assistant State's Attorney Philip A. Mock told the county board Thursday the land has been held in a public trust since it was first mapped in the 1830s. It was formerly the site of a courthouse built in 1898 as well as a jail, and the land needs to continue to be used for the public.

"The first thing the board needs to realize is that you don't own the property where the courthouse is located," Mock said. "You are merely a trustee over that property. You don't own it. You do not have the ability to do what you want to do with it. It has to be held in public use."

Mock said any governmental use is considered a public use.



The former Will County Courthouse in Joliet. (Susan DeMar Lafferty / Daily Southtown)

The former courthouse, 14 W. Jefferson St., has sat vacant since November 2020 when the new 10-story courthouse opened nearby.

In the county's master plan in 2011, officials determined they needed to consolidate all court functions into a new courthouse, county documents said. There was subsequent discussion about repurposing the courthouse into a county administrative building.

In 2017, the county estimated it would cost about \$43 million to renovate the courthouse, which was more expensive than anticipated. The county has been planning for its demolition since 2019.

Dave Tkac, the director of capital programming for the county's executive office, told a committee last week renovation costs would likely be double in today's dollars.

"Basically, every building system in there is shot with exception of the structure," he said. "The roof, the mechanical equipment, the plumbing equipment, the windows, everything in that building would need to be removed and replaced."

Recently, though, groups interested in redeveloping the building have come forth and are petitioning to have the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places by the National Park Service.

In January, Landmarks Illinois, a historic preservation group, asked developers and architectural firms to come up with ideas by March 10 to preserve or repurpose the courthouse.

Quinn Adamowski, regional advocacy manager for Landmarks Illinois, said the old McHenry County Courthouse is owned by the city Woodstock and is entering into a lease with private businesses. The former Effingham County Courthouse is a museum, he said.



Quinn Adamowski with Landmarks Illinois tells Will County Board members six firms have expressed interest in repurposing the former courthouse. (Michelle Mullins / Daily Southtown)

Some of the architectural firms that submitted interest in redeveloping the Will County Courthouse have done work on the nearby Rialto Square Theatre and the former Joliet prison.

Adamowski said he wants the board to “press the pause button” on demolition, saying the county board and leadership has changed over the last several years.

“I would encourage each of you to think through this one more time,” Adamowski said Thursday. “Demolition right now is a choice. This building does not have to go anywhere.”

A 1961 court case decreed the property is held by the county as public ground and cannot be conveyed or leased except to public, municipal or governmental bodies.

Mock wrote in a legal opinion that the Illinois General Assembly could pass legislation allowing transfer of the courthouse to a private entity to preserve the building’s architecture.

He said another hurdle would be convincing the courts the use is for the public. He said housing would not be considered a public use because it is only for the residents of those homes.

“Not only do you have to convince the legislature, you have to convince the circuit court,” Mock said. “The circuit court also contains supervisory authority over the trustee, which is the county.”

He said the county would likely end up in court if it pursues any redevelopment options not consistent with public use.

“So we are going to end up in court if we do anything other than a traditional governmental use?” asked board member Sherry Newquist, a Democrat from Steger.

“Most likely,” Mock responded.

Hudson Hollister with Courthouse Preservation Partnership said state Sen. Rachel Ventura, D-Joliet, is offering to work with the county government on state legislation to allow for the redevelopment.



The Will County Board hears presentations Thursday on possible uses for the former courthouse in downtown Joliet. (Michelle Mullins / Daily Southtown)

One potential option is to amend the original 1834 plat to move the public-use designation a block west on the land where the new courthouse sits, Hollister said.

In a letter to the county, Ventura, a former Will County Board member, said community interest in reusing the building has grown in the last four years.

Some board members said they need to revisit the cost of demolition, the cost of ongoing maintenance and the potential for reusing the building.

Board member Frankie Pretzel, a Republican from New Lenox, said the board is likely to hear more information at subsequent meetings so the board needs to have answers to its questions, including whether it needs to vote again on demolition.

County Board Chair Judy Ogalla, a Republican from Monee, said she doesn't like the idea of breaking the trust for public use.

Board member Steve Balich, the Republican leader from Homer Glen, said he thinks the private developer is trying to make money off the county.

Board member Jackie Traynere, the Democratic leader from Bolingbrook, said she will not vote to demolish the building until there is a complete plan in front of her, whether it is demolishing, rehabbing or changing the plat's designation.

"To me, the demolition is just the beginning and we don't have an end," Traynere said.

Michelle Mullins is a freelance reporter.
