

Historic preservationists may seek last shot for Rockford building

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LOCAL

Seeking to save Elks Lodge, historic preservationists could ask Rockford to take ownership

Rockford Register Star

- Rockford is seeking bids to demolish the historic former Elks Lodge after years of failed attempts to get the owner to make repairs.
- The Historic Preservation Commission is exploring options for the city to take control of the property and pursue redevelopment.
- The city administrator maintains that the owner has been given ample opportunity to address the building's deterioration and opposes a taxpayer bailout.

As Rockford seeks bids for the demolition of the historic former Elks Lodge after nearly seven years of legal battles, members of the Rockford Historic Preservation Commission are holding out hope it can still be saved.

Rockford officials have for years prodded Mark McInnis of Argyll Properties to repair the dilapidated structure at 210 W. Jefferson St. He once dreamed of restoring it as a restaurant and banquet facility.

City legal officials took the company to court in 2018 asking a judge to force the owner to make repairs or demolish the structure as its walls crumbled onto city sidewalks and streets and its roof sustained severe damage. It was never repaired.

Rockford is seeking bids to have it demolished, which could cost as much as \$500,000. It then would try to recoup the cost from the owner by placing liens on the property.

Now at the 11th hour, McInnis and his wife are appealing to the Historic Preservation Commission in a last-ditch effort to save the structure.

While historic preservationists may be interested in preserving the building, they are likely less interested in preserving its current ownership, said Jennifer Spencer of StudioGWA, chairwoman of the Historic Preservation Commission.

Could city take ownership?

"The owner has had, unfortunately, a very long time to make this a viable project and it's, I think, become very clear that it's just not going to happen — at least for them," Spencer said. "Is there an opportunity or a way for the city to take control of it and put a request for proposals out?"

Commission members plan to meet at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday at Rockford City Hall to hear what the owner is asking of them. But Spencer and Ald. Mark Bonne, D-14, who sits on the commission, appear more interested in finding a way for the city to take control of the property and give redevelopment another chance.

"At the very least that's something we would like to see: Give it one more shot," Spencer said. "Demolition is permanent. We're erasing our history when we do this, and nobody wants that to happen. But at the same time, there's got to be a better plan than let's just sit on it for another four years."

McInnis, who is said to now be attempting to sell the property, did not respond to a voicemail message seeking comment.

No 'bailout'

City Administrator Todd Cagnoni said officials have given Argyll Properties every opportunity to repair the former Elk's Lodge. If the building had been properly maintained, the owners and the city wouldn't be in this position, Cagnoni said.

The building has become a safety hazard for passing motorists and pedestrians, he added.

The owner's poor track record includes code violations and the demolition of a [dilapidated house](#) last year that had served as the offices of Argyll Properties at 710 N. Church St.

"What we don't support is a taxpayer bailout to this property owner," Cagnoni said. "This individual certainly has burdened taxpayers in a significant way without the capacity to move forward with the project."

History at stake

The Elks Lodge was built as a social hall in 1912 by Chicago architect Lawrence Buck. It was designed in the classical revival style with prairie style influences. There is a ballroom with arched ceilings on the second floor and a bowling alley on the lower level. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2005.

The Elks Club had sold the building in 1990 because of declining membership. The structure passed through the hands of several owners since then including Goodwill Industries, which sold it to Argyll Properties about 12 years ago.

Bonne said he wants to work with city legal officials to develop a new strategy that avoids demolition, at least for now, gives the city control over the building and grants the historic structure one more chance at redevelopment.

"I don't know if that's a thing, but we should know," Bonne said. "When this building went from Goodwill to Argyll, it was a different downtown then. Downtown has progressed. There might be new entities that would look at this building if it were to go up for sale."

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