


Yovani Baez-Rose
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Camilo Espitia
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MEMORANDUM

TO: Thomas A. Golden, Jr., City Manager 

FROM: Yovani Baez-Rose, Assistant City Manager/DPD Director

CC: Ali Carter, Director of Economic Development
Francesca Cigliano, Senior Planner

SUBJECT: MOTION RESPONSE: 9/12/2023 – C. Gitschier - Req. City Mgr. Look Feasibility of Demolishing the Smith Baker Center

The City-owned property located at 412 Merrimack Street consists of land improved by a church structure constructed in 1884 for use as the First Congregational Church. The City of Lowell purchased the property on September 24, 1975, for the sum of Eighty-Five Thousand Dollars (\$85,000.00). The building later became home to the Council on Aging and was known as the “Smith Baker Center.” The Council on Aging was relocated in 2002; subsequently the building has been vacant.

The City Council declared the property surplus in July of 2011 and authorized the City Manager to seek proposals under the provisions of Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 30B. The parcel 12,458 square feet +/- improved by a building consisting of 17,849 square feet +/- gross building area. The property is in an Urban-Mixed-Use (UMU) zoning district. The deed to the City does not limit the ability to sell the property or restrict its reuse options; however, the property is listed on the National and State Registers of Historic Places and as such, any action with regard to the property utilizing federal or state undertakings, such as funding, would require approval by the Massachusetts Historical Commission."

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) put an RFP out seeking proposals for a minimum price of Three Hundred Thousand (\$300,000.00) Dollars consistent with the minimum appraised value determined by a professional appraisal of the property completed April 29, 2011. The value reflected the property in its “as is” condition based on a restriction for arts and entertainment uses. DPD conducted a Request for Proposals (RFP) in October of 2011 and extended the submittal deadline to April of 2012. Approximately nine proposers obtained the RFP and reviewed the property for development potential; however, no proposals were submitted, and feedback provided indicated the economic conditions and operating costs as a deterrent to providing a proposal. It is important to note this determination by the private market prior to recent deterioration of the building exterior and critical systems since the first RFP.

DPD again issued an RFP on January 14, 2015, and extended the submittal deadline to July of 2015. Approximately twelve proposers obtained the RFP and reviewed the property for development potential. DPD received a single proposal from the Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA) for the purchase and redevelopment of the Smith Baker. CBA proposed a community center with public access on the

first floor and programming for the upstairs performance space. However, the funding model proposed by CBA proved incompatible with restrictions placed in the original RFP. Therefore, the RFP was cancelled in 2018.

An updated appraisal was obtained on August 25, 2018 that reflected the market value at that time of Three Hundred and Forty Thousand (\$340,000.00) Dollars. This appraisal was accompanied by a detailed Facility Condition Assessment, which included a detailed plan of immediate needs for the structure as well as a 10-year plan of prioritized facility needs by building system. At the time that study was authored, the building's Current Replacement Value (CRV) was \$1,284,000 with total capital needs amounting to \$2,915,683. In 2019 the city put an RFP out for the disposition of the Smith Baker property, at the time the only respondent's proposal was not consistent with the RFP and the RFP was cancelled.

Since the last building assessment, the structure has continued to deteriorate, and COVID-related economic conditions have significantly increased construction costs since the last replacement value was estimated. DPD staff believe the potential use of the Smith Baker as a performance space is economically unrealistic. In July of 2023, DPD staff conducted a walk-through of the property with two licensed general contractors. Upon inspection of the building to both contractors determined the building was structurally sound enough for hazardous material removal to occur.

Currently there are two options available for the Smith Baker Center, the first is to RFP the property without a performance space restriction and allow developers to determine the highest and best use of the site while maintaining the exterior of the building in-tact. The second option would be for the city to move forward with hazardous material abatement, demolish the building, and RFP the available land for use. DPD does not have a funding source identified that would cover the cost of abatement and demolition at this time.

GEC/ybr