



Diane Nichols Tradd
Assistant City Manager/DPD Director

Craig Thomas
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MEMORANDUM

TO: Eileen M. Donoghue, City Manager *EMD*

FROM: Diane N. Tradd, Assistant City Manager/DPD Director

DATE: March 12, 2019

SUBJECT: MOTION OF 1/29/19 BY COUNCILOR NUON
REQUEST CITY MANAGER PROVIDE A REPORT UPDATING STATUS OF 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 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 land at 412 Merrimack Street is 12,458 square feet +/- improved by a building consisting of 17,849 square feet +/- gross building area. The property is located in an Urban-Mixed-Use (UMU) zoning district. The City of Lowell purchased the property on September 24, 1975 for the sum of Eighty Five Thousand Dollars (\$85,000.00). 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 Register of Historic Places and restricted by a Preservation Restriction with the Massachusetts Historical Commission, thus alterations would require approval.

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 for the disposition of said parcel and authorized the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) to seek proposals for a minimum proposal 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, after considerable work by CBA and the City’s Law Department to complete the property disposition, the RFP was cancelled in 2018.

A new strategy is needed to ensure the building, which is an important building and cultural asset in downtown, does not continue to deteriorate, which occurs in unoccupied and vacant buildings. DPD has started the process of preparing a revised RFP for review and approval. The revised RFP would substantially reduce or eliminate the restrictions in the 2015 RFP. Instead, the goal is for a very simple RFP to be widely marketed that will prioritize any entity that can immediately and substantially reinvest in the building. DPD hopes to have the RFP publicly available this spring.

PL/ns

cc: Patti Lucken, Asset Manager