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Old Cook County Hospital: Support for Museum at Site, But Not Housing

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Based in 2002, The Cook County Bureau of Economic Development is now soliciting ideas for the potential mixed-use redevelopment of the old hospital building.

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MEDICAL DISTRICT — Before there were rules against it, Susan Rogers would spend 48 hours straight at the old Cook County Hospital, helping the sick and saving the critically ill.

"I essentially grew up there," said Rogers, who was hired at the hospital in 1979. "It's taken me up until the last couple of years to actually say 'Stroger.'"

Community members who work in and live near the Medical District shared stories and offered ideas Tuesday night, providing a first framework for what could next live at the old Cook County Hospital building.

The workshop at Hecker Auditorium marked the beginning of the redevelopment of the vacant hospital, said Tim Brangle, senior associate with Chicago Consultants Studio Inc., the group managing the development.

To honor the hospital's rich legacy, Rogers, a retired doctor who continues to volunteer at Stroger Hospital, and Bob Remer, a retired hospital administrator, want a Cook County Medical Museum incorporated into the building's next life.

"There's a lot of history there," said Remer, who is also president of the Edgewater Historical Society. "If we're talking about drawing people to this medical campus, a museum would fit nicely in the context of hotels, medical conferences, students."

At the session, community members generally did not support putting market-rate housing on the site. Some medical professionals thought the parking, noise and other factors that come with a housing development would be disruptive to the medical campus, said Ramona Westbrook, an architect with Brook Architecture.

But other housing uses, including homes for transgendered individuals, student dorms, affordable senior housing and a nursing home were all pitched at the workshop, Westbrook said.

Some proposed uses would benefit from the building's proximity to the sprawling medical campus. Ideas included a medical training facility, insurance offices or a data center, said Bonnie McDonald, CEO of Landmarks Illinois, (http://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/tags/landmarks-illinois) a non-profit dedicated to historic preservation.

With a modern addition, the site could house a brewpub or gym, too. Officials agreed that a mixed-use development is the most realistic plan for the building.

About 200 people attended the event hosted by the Cook County Bureau of Economic Development and the Chicago Architecture Foundation Tuesday night.

Saving history

The historic building is "more than just architecture," McDonald said Tuesday night, lending her support for a medical museum at the site.

A beacon to Chicago's poor, old Cook County was known as "Chicago's Ellis Island," McDonald said, a hospital that cared for generations of Chicagoans who could not otherwise find health care.

Once known as the nation's largest public hospital, doctors at Cook County Hospital pioneered AIDS research, diagnosed sickle cell anemia and made medical strides in lab testing, blood banks and trauma care.

The old hospital has been vacant since 2002. Since then, officials have debated whether the original building should be preserved to save history or demolished to create a clear pathway for development. The proposed redevelopment site includes land to the north and south of the existing building.

While the fall workshops (http://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20140916/medical-district/county-seeks-ideas-for-old-cook-county-hospital-redevelopment) aim to focus plans that would utilize all or part of the existing building, Brangle said the county will consider the most viable ideas, and that could still mean demolition.

But McDonald, an advocate for the survival of the Beaux Arts-style building, said she's encouraged by the process.

"This is the first time in 14 years that [the county] has tried to bring forth a preservation solution," McDonald said. "They are genuinely interested in exploring all options."

Landmarks Illinois presented a reuse plan to Cook County officials in 2003.

What's next?

In the next 10 days, civic organizations and other interested groups will create development briefs outlining their plan for possible uses and design concepts for the site. The development briefs will be used to inform developers of the opportunities and constraints at the old hospital site.

The concepts will be presented at 6 p.m. Oct. 7 at the architecture foundation's Lecture Hall, 224 S. Michigan Ave.

As of Tuesday night, registration (http://www.cookcountylil.gov/cook-county-hospital-strategic-redevelopment/) was closed because the October event is at capacity. Officials do plan to live stream (http://dialogues.architecture.org/charrette-presentation) the event.

Leaders from the Metropolitan Council, Landmarks Illinois, the Chicago Central Area Committee and others are expected to present development briefs at the October presentation.

The county is expected to seek developer proposals by early winter, Brangle said.

The architecture foundation is also collecting feedback on potential uses for the historic building through an online survey (http://dialogues.architecture.org/cook-county-hospital) and Twitter hashtag (https://twitter.com/chiarchitecture/status/514552269631946752).

The former hospital, 1835 W. Harrison St., was replaced by Stroger Hospital of Cook County (http://www.cookcountyhhs.org/locations/john-h-stroger-jr-hospital/). Completed in 1914, the remaining former hospital structure was previously used as the administrative wing and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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