

Preckwinkle resurrects plans to redevelop shuttered Cook County Hospital

By Kristen Schorsch January 29, 2014

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle is resuscitating plans to redevelop Cook County Hospital, a 100-year-old dilapidated building shuttered more than a decade ago.

Within the next few months, Cook County plans to hire a manager to guide the redevelopment effort of about 10 acres on the Near West Side campus of the **Cook County Health and Hospitals System**, with an eye toward preserving the historic public hospital building, said John Cooke, director of capital planning and policy for Ms. Preckwinkle.

County officials also have established a new timetable for action, calling for the new manager to fine-tune various development scenarios, hire a developer this summer and bring a redevelopment plan to the Cook County Board for approval in the fall.

There have been many redevelopment proposals over the years. **Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin**, who said the old eight-story hospital is “near and dear” to his heart, called the latest effort the most serious since 2011.

“I think we’re in the position to take the gray lady of Harrison and put her back into use,” Mr. Suffredin said, referring to the old hospital at 1835 W. Harrison St.

The county’s challenge will be finding the financial resources to pull off the project, said Laurence Msall, executive director of the **Civic Federation**, a fiscal watchdog group. But he added that getting the “eyesore” onto the tax rolls so that it can generate revenue is a must.

“The sooner (the county) can get out from underneath this former hospital site, the better,” Mr. Msall said.

The plans would be developed in consultation with the Illinois Medical District, an economic development arm that includes the Cook County health system, which is working to build a separate **10-acre mixed-use project**, including a hotel, around the corner.

“This is about taking a comprehensive approach about the redevelopment of the entire area,” Mr. Cooke said. “We’re working very closely with the (Illinois Medical District) so we’re using our efforts together so we’re not building competing structures on our properties.”

The health system redevelopment would encompass the massive former hospital building — the size of nearly five football fields — a former nursing school the health system uses for administrative offices and the existing outpatient Fantus Clinic, among other properties.

The old Cook County Hospital was known for its Beaux Arts-style architecture as well as its medical advances and care for the poor, according to a 2003 **report** from the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois.

The hospital was shuttered to make way for a new facility. Its replacement, **John H. Stroger Jr. Hospital**, named for the former Cook County Board president, debuted around the corner from the old hospital in 2002. Stroger is one of two hospitals in the Cook County health system, which is often viewed as the last resort for the county’s poor and uninsured and includes a network of clinics.

NO SHORTAGE OF IDEAS

Over the years, there has been no shortage of ideas — along with hefty price tags — on what to do with Cook County Hospital, including at least one proposal to **demolish it**.

In 2011, soon after she was elected county president, Ms. Preckwinkle proposed a major overhaul that included a \$126 million plan to transform the old hospital building into office space. That would have replaced the health system's existing administrative offices, which officials said were not up to code and inefficient for office use. Her 2011 plan also included building a new Fantus Clinic for \$92 million to replace the current aging facility.

A spokeswoman for Ms. Preckwinkle said in an email that the proposal, which was part of a **countywide capital improvement plan**, was commissioned during the board president's transition and was based on information from the previous administration. No one has looked at the redevelopment comprehensively, she said.

In 2009, Chicago-based real estate firm Jones Lang LaSalle Inc. **recommended** renovating the old hospital for administrative office space for the health system. With a \$108 million price tag, the idea was the "highest and best market use" and least annual cost to the county compared to converting the hospital into a hotel, senior housing or condominiums, the firm said in the report prepared for the county.

Ms. Preckwinkle's spokeswoman noted that the market has changed since the 2009 report, which did not focus on land surrounding the hospital.

"We've really been waiting for the opportunity to have a better plan put together," Mr. Suffredin said.

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