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Developer will rent space in Old Town Hall

By Doug Dalena
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STAMFORD -- After years of debate and planning about the future of the vacant Old Town Hall, the city has secured a tenant for the century-old landmark, officials confirmed yesterday.

National Realty and Development Corp., a developer and owner of retail, office and residential real estate, and owner of the Lord & Taylor and Linens & Things retail chains, will have about 80 employees in the Beaux Arts building in spring 2009, Economic Development Director Michael Freimuth said yesterday.

That will require completion of a \$16 million renovation and addition.

The \$400,000 annual rent, about \$20 per square foot, will stay the same for 10 years and increase by the rate of consumer price index every year after that, Freimuth said.

The city has met with six potential bidders on the construction contract and hopes to start work by December.

"This building's been vacant for many, many years. It has represented untold challenges," Mayor Dannel Malloy said. "A number of years ago, we just decided to press ahead. We've done it."

NRDC, owned by Greenwich residents Robert Baker and his son, Richard Baker, also will pay to redesign the interior and pay utility costs for the entire building most of the time, with the city paying utility costs for parts of the building when it is open to the public.

The company will not vacate its Purchase, N.Y., headquarters, Managing Director Mark Robbins said.

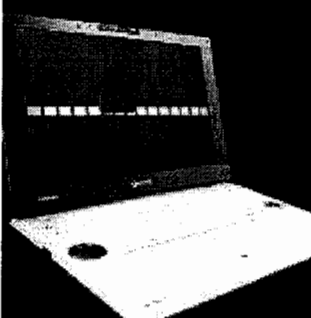
Most of the company's executives live in lower Fairfield County, but it was not clear whether they would move their offices to Stamford, he said.

Much of 40,000-square-foot building will be used by employees of NRDC's equity arm, which owns the retail chains and companies that NRDC is acquiring.

"It definitely represents expansion," Robbins said. "This space is certainly an architectural icon in a real Tiffany location in Stamford, and we've got an enormous commitment to Stamford in terms of our retail and residential business platforms."

NRDC is planning a major expansion of the Lord & Taylor at Bull's Head, and is building a planned community with 24 luxury homes on a former North Stamford estate off Erskine Road. It also owns the Burlington Coat

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Factory building on Broad Street and a retail plaza on High Ridge Road whose anchor tenant is Eastern Mountain Sports.

The tentative agreement calls for most of Old Town Hall's ground floor to be used as gallery space for art and history exhibits, and for public access to the historic building's marble grand staircase and second-floor balcony.

NRDC would use two rooms off the Main Street lobby, which have historic murals on the walls, as conference rooms during the business day. The rooms would be available for exhibits, meetings of community groups and special events at other times, Freimuth said.

Private groups and nonprofit agencies would have to pay to use the public spaces; public agencies would not.

Details of how often the public areas will be open and rental rates are far from final, Freimuth said. But the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Agency, not NRDC, would control public access.

NRDC has proposed creating and contributing to an arts foundation to attract and manage exhibits in the public spaces, and is offering works from its extensive collection of 20th century and contemporary art to jump-start the exhibits.

Visitors and the public would use the main entrance at the top of a recently restored outside staircase, while NRDC employees would use a new entrance on Bank Street.

A planned addition to the building's east side, with elevators and code-compliant stairwells, would also contain some public space.

"There's going to be a lot more public access than there has in the past 20 years, I can assure you," Malloy said.

The aged building closed in 1987, when the town clerk's office and other remnants of the city government's 80-year presence there moved into the Government Center at 888 Washington Blvd. Old Town Hall opened in 1907, on the same site at Atlantic, Bank and Main streets as its predecessor, which burned down in a spectacular fire in 1904.

The city and NRDC are still drafting a letter of intent that will lay out the lease terms. But Freimuth, who has spearheaded the effort to reopen the building along with city engineer Jeff Pardo, expressed confidence that the company is committed to occupying the building.

The tentative agreement with NRDC calls for the city to be responsible for the expansion and interior renovation, and for NRDC to perform the redesign of the building's interior.

To do that, Freimuth needs to obtain approval from several city boards, complete complex arrangements for two types of federal tax credits that will finance most of the project costs, and award a construction contract this fall.

"We need to get the contractor working in December to get through what is a 14- to 16-month construction window," he said.

Robbins said NRDC is anxious to move into the building but understands that the timeline is tight. He said the company is more concerned about the quality of the restoration than the speed of the work.

"What we're particularly interested in is the architectural value of this building," he said. "If the timeline slips a little, we're not trying to time the market."

City Rep. Harry Day, R-13, a member of the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Committee, said the city is getting most of what it wanted when it set out to revive the timeworn building.

"It was imperative that we find the right tenant, and preferably one tenant. With one tenant, it would maximize the

possibility to maximize the public space, and it really makes the management of the building a whole lot easier," he said.

Authority members were concerned about the lease's length, but accepted it because the overall deal would help finance restoration of the building, open much of it to the public and subsidize the cost of keeping it open, Day said.

"To top it all off, we've got a real desirable, solid organization with a great reputation," he said.

NRDC will pay lower rent than most buildings in the heart of downtown, but Day and Freimuth both said Old Town Hall doesn't have the layout or the modern amenities that would command higher payments. The company will get 74 free parking spaces at the city's Bell Street garage during business hours, but its employees will have to pay the meters after that, Freimuth said.

Officials also said NRDC was the only serious tenant willing to pay market rents to occupy the whole building and make the rest available for active public uses.

Negotiations with the company continued for more than a year, Freimuth said.

Preservationists, residents and city leaders had all expressed concern that the building have public uses, and much of the negotiations focused on how to accommodate NRDC's need to operate a business in an environment that included public access to nearly half the building, as well as apportioning the costs of operating the building.

An earlier version of the arrangement included a higher rent, but with the city paying for utilities.

"After years and years and years of work and effort by a lot of people to make this come true, I feel like we're on the edge of success here," Day said. "I really, really feel good about it."

Day and Malloy said the rental agreement could not have been put together without Freimuth.

"The city owes him a huge debt of gratitude on this," Day said.