

Apartments planned for former Michigan School for the Blind building in \$15 million transformation



LANSING - Lansing Mayor Virg Bernero announced a plan today to redevelop the Abigail Building on the campus of the former Michigan School for the Blind that would turn the 164-year-old building into low-income residential apartments.

"Once again we were able to preserve an important part of Lansing's history by repurposing the Abigail," Bernero said. The School for the Blind opened at the site in 1915, with its most famous alumnus being Motown legend Stevie Wonder.

"We have cherished this campus and understood its enormous potential to be transformed into something special," Bernero said. The city acquired the building from the state in 2005 and has already restored two of the campus' buildings: The Superintendents House is now home to Rizzi Designs and the former library which is now home to the Ingham County Land Bank.

"The [Abigail] behind us is next in line," Bernero said. "It's an extraordinary piece of

architecture and an important part of Lansing's history. Today, I'm delighted to announce that we've formed an amazing public-private partnership to bring this historic building back to life."

The school closed in 1995 following years of declining enrollment and moved to Flint. The Abigail has since fallen into disrepair and on more than on occasion was facing the wrecking ball.

"I recall before [Bernero] sat in the seat of the mayor's office, he called me and said we've got to do something about the School for the Blind," Bob Johnson, head of the city's Planning and Neighborhood Development Department, said Bernero told him in December 2005.

"We saved this," Johnson added. "There was discussion of demolishing everything you see on this campus. There were parties interested in seeing everything gone."

The loss of that history could've left a gaping hole in the Walnut Neighborhood. Now the campus, which has gone through a slow restoration, will have a shot to preserve its history.

"One reason people have felt so strong about saving it is because it is so unique," Valerie Marvin, president of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing, said. Marvin led a tour of the abandoned campus one year ago today.

"It's not a pole barn," she said. "It's not something that you would build today necessarily. It would be extraordinarily expensive to build this today and it will be expensive to restore."

The proposed renovation will cost an estimated \$15 million and will be funded through low income housing tax credits and HOME funds from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, and loans from the Great Lakes Capital Fund, which currently owns the property through a subsidiary.

The restoration will be led by the G.A. Haan Development Group, which is based in Harbor Springs. Haan Development has a number of residential properties in northern lower Michigan and the Upper Peninsula as well as Wyoming and the Dakotas.

"The word campus comes to mind," Gerald Haan, CEO of Haan Development, said. He first visited the building six months ago and said that the restoration could start late in 2015.

"Nowadays in real estate development, people use the word campus in commercial complexes," Haan said. "When I walked out here, I saw that we already have a campus. The land is one thing that caught my attention and the [Abigail] is majestic.

Haan said that it is critical that the building's history be preserved as much as possible.

"When you look at the building, the hope is to maintain it as much as possible and I think we can be successful at that." Haan said that the initial stages of the project will start this summer.

Bernero touted the development as another "stabilizing element" of the neighborhood and, on Good Friday, called it a "Phenomenal Friday" for the city.

"There's an old saying that whole is greater than the sum of its parts," he said. "A project like this that takes a big investment and a big vision is only possible when we all work together. Big deals like this require cooperation from all of us."

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