YMCA Takes a Position on the Stevens House Demolition

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The Winsted Voice

The YMCA is planning a major renovation of the 1925 wing of its Winsted facility located at 480 Main Street, which is adjacent to the Stevens House. It involves the rehabilitation of the second and third floors to make them handicapped accessible, and to renovate the emergency shelter and SRO (single room occupancy) housing units. A $600,000 construction grant has been received from the State Department of Social Services for this purpose. A $543,000 grant has been received from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to fund the operation of 11 SRO section 8 certificates for a ten year period.

As part of an ongoing comprehensive plan, the YMCA will also renovate other program and service areas of the facility and grounds which will be privately financed. The demolition of the Stevens House is part of this comprehensive plan. This will improve the overall parking situation and includes additional handicapped accessible spaces.

The YMCA acquired the Stevens House in the late 1970's. This acquisition was made as part of a master plan which called for the purchase of other buildings, the construction of a 25 meter swimming pool and other parking and facility renovations. The need for this development was made evident during a strategic planning process in 1978. It indicated that, without significant improvements in the physical plant, the YMCA would close.

A funding plan to finance these improvements was developed. A capital campaign was conducted in the late 1970's and $850,000 was raised. This was not enough to complete the pool let alone the entire renovation project. However the YMCA decided to proceed with the pool construction calling on all available endowment funds and committing to a $200,000 mortgage. A second capital campaign was conducted in 1985. Thanks to the generosity and hard work of many volunteers and donors this debt was eliminated. The resources to complete the parking portion of the project was not, and have not been, available. A certificate of occupancy was granted by the town and the pool was opened in 1986. The unoccupied and deteriorating Stevens House remained standing.

Since that time the YMCA has worked aggressively to find financially viable and effective alternate uses for the Stevens House:

- a Chamber of Commerce initiative to purchase the property and develop parking
- selling the house outright,
- renovating the house into market rate housing (a $400,000 grant had been committed by DOH for this purpose).

The Town of Winsted is on record as supporting the use of this property for parking, and parking only as substantiated by the following actions:

- 1984 ZBA denial of variance to allow for the sale of the building
- 1990 ZBA denial of variance to allow for the $400,000 affordable housing renovation (the YMCA was forced to decline the grant)
- 1992 Town initiative/effort to legally force the YMCA to demolish the building.

The YMCA has been working for more than a decade in an effort to utilize the Stevens House as a community resource. It is clear that the Town sees this house as a non-compliant building. The message is also clear that a vast majority of every community and YMCA constituent group (including members, donors, YMCA boards/committees, Main Street merchants and the United Way) favor removal of the Stevens House.

THEREFORE THE YMCA IS MAKING EVERY EFFORT TO DEMOLISH THE STEVENS HOUSE AND TO PROVIDE PARKING ON THAT SITE.

This effort has been blocked by a formal complaint submitted to The Department of Housing and Urban Development by Charlene LaVoie of the Office of the Community Lawyer. Her complaint linked the Stevens House removal with the third floor renovation project at the YMCA. This made the Stevens House subject to the HUD environmental survey which is required on all HUD grants. As the house is on the historic inventory the YMCA will not meet the requirements of the environmental survey. It must be removed from the inventory. All attempts by the YMCA to convince HUD that the Stevens House demolition is a separate project with a 12 year history have thus far proved fertile.

The YMCA cannot jeopardize $543,000 in HUD funding. These monies guarantee the successful operation of the SRO's. It also enhances the state mandated emergency shelter which the YMCA operates for the town. The YMCA has therefore made formal application to the State Historical Committee to have the house removed from the inventory. This will clear the way for HUD approval and demolition.

Last summer the Nader Trust sponsored a design charette to help plan for the future development of the Town. During this process the YMCA made it clear that it was likely that the house would be coming down in the near future. A charette architect, when touring the Y property, commented to YMCA officials that the house was "not very significant." A community group evolved from the charette process, the Winsted Design Coalition. Their charge - to do all it can to implement the charette recommendations. Last March this coalition was asked to support an effort to save the Stevens House. They voted not to do so.

Claire Nader has a vision of how the Stevens House could be used to benefit the community. She has shared this vision with YMCA officials and recently with the community in an article published in the Winsted Voice. This vision included such items as the development of a town center, a learning center, family resource center, etc. It would require significant financial resources for facility renovation and ongoing dollars to operate this type of center.

The YMCA applauds this program concept but does not believe that it is in any way linked to this property. Demolition of the house need not destroy this vision. The YMCA would welcome an opportunity to collaborate with the Nader Trust on such a program. There are other vacant buildings in town which could potentially be used for this purpose including the Dann Building and the Carriage House which are owned by the Nader Trust.

IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE TOWN, MERCHANTS, MEMBERS, DONORS, AND CONSTITUENTS OF THE YMCA, THE Y WILL VIGOROUSLY PURSUE THE DEMOLITION OF THE STEVENS HOUSE SO THAT ITS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES MAY CONTINUE TO GROW.