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Last Gasp for Hospital?

New York State Is Selling Its Defunct Hospitals, but One City Objects to a Sale.

Story by Elizabeth Benjamin / July 8, 2005



The view from J.N. Adam Hospital, which could be sold to a logging company. (Friends of J.N. Adam)

In upstate New York, the Adirondack town of Saranac Lake is synonymous with tuberculosis treatment. Patients with the disease came to the picturesque waterfront community, where TB research pioneer Edward Livingston Trudeau had his laboratory, to sit on the porches of massive Victorians and take “the rest cure,” a regime based on fresh air and relaxation.

But there were other lesser known TB treatment facilities scattered around the state, including one built outside Buffalo in the early 1900s on land donated to the city by its then-mayor James Noble Adam. Inspired by Saranac Lake, which has capitalized on its history by preserving many structures from the TB era and using them as a base for cultural tourism, Buffalo preservationists would like to see the J.N. Adam facility rehabilitated and reused as well. But some city and state officials want to sell the former hospital and its bucolic wooded acres to a logging company, and this summer, a battle over the site's future is in full swing.

The marketing of the J.N. Adam property is part of an ongoing effort by New York state to sell off its large hospital complexes now that it has gotten out of the business of providing care to the developmentally disabled and mentally ill. According to the Empire State Development Corp., roughly one dozen of these hospitals have already been sold, two (including the J.N. Adam site) are under contract, and six more remain up for sale. With the properties under contract, these defunct hospitals have netted the state \$78.3 million, according to ESDC spokesman Ron Jury.

This is the second time the state has solicited bids for the former J.N. Adam hospital, Jury says. Many of the ex-hospitals are difficult to sell because they have what Jury called “environmental issues.” The J.N. Adam property, for example, is assessed at \$4 million, but also is home to an old dump the state estimates will cost several million dollars to clean up.

“Our goal is to successfully sell this property,” Jury says. “We have a bidder who wants clear

title to the property, and we're trying to make that happen.”

The state wants to sell the 650-acre property to a logging company, Trathen Land Co., a Livingston County-based company, for \$371,000. The locality in which the parcel is situated, Perrysburg, in Cattaraugus County, supports the sale, which would return the property to the tax rolls and give the town water rights. Buffalo Mayor Anthony Masiello is also in favor of the sale.

But in an odd twist, the Common Council of Buffalo, which is about 40 miles away but has a right to the J.N. Adam site, voted in January against the sale, even though the cash-strapped city would receive 90 percent of the revenue, or \$333,900. Applauding the decision, local preservationists believe a better re-use could be found for the property than logging.

“When the council voted 'no' on the logging proposal, we saw an opportunity to put together a proposal that would have benefit to the community, and protect the resources ... both natural and historical,” says Julie Broyles, a member of the grassroots group Friends of J.N. Adam Historic Landmark and Forest whose family owns property near Perrysburg.

The hospital, designed by architect John Hopper Coxhead, has a cafeteria with a stained-glass dome that, legend had it, loomed over President William McKinley as he was fatally shot in Buffalo during the Pan-American Exposition in 1901. (That theory has since been debunked, but the property is nevertheless on the state's historic register).

By 1960, the state had taken over the J.N. Adam property as a center for the developmentally disabled—a use that persisted until 1993.

There are now more than two dozen vacant structures on the site, although not all of them part of the hospital complex. The main buildings are long and low, with some lines reminiscent of Prairie-style architecture. The land, with rolling hills that boast many different types of trees, is a favorite locale for outdoor enthusiasts. The sale is right now in limbo, and appears it will remain there indefinitely. In May, Trathen Land Co. sued the city and the state. The suit argues that the city didn't have the right to block the sale because it exercised its reversionary rights too late.

“We're basically looking to finish our rights under contract with the state of New York to purchase the property,” says the company's president, Thomas S. Trathen. “We tried to do it sensitively and diplomatically, only to be treated in a really disrespectful manner.”

Trathen says the state has offered to transfer the property to him with a “cloud on the deed,” meaning with the question of the city's reversionary right unsettled, but he declined.

The logging company owns 4,500 acres in New York and manages another 50,000 of private forest, and Trathen says his goal is to strike a balance between business and stewardship of the land. He planned to continue allowing recreational use on the property's 450 acres of woods and pasture and develop the other 200 acres on which the hospital buildings now sit.

Trathen says he is willing to “conserve the buildings out there” unless they are “dangerous to people and can't be salvaged. Anything that's structurally sound, we are absolutely going to rehab,” he says.

Buffalo Common Council President David Franczyk led to the charge to block the sale, which the council officially rejected in a 5-4 vote in January. The city, which issued bonds in the early 1900s to build the hospital structures as well as its water system, has the power to oppose sale because it retained a so-called reversionary right to the site when it was transferred to the state in

1960.

Franczyk says he believes a better use ... and potentially more money ... could be found for the property, potentially one for which the historic buildings will not be torn down. He doubts Trathen's pledge to preserve.

“I contacted them, and asked whether they would rehabilitate the buildings and provide conservation easements,” Franczyk says. “They said they'd pulverize the buildings and cut down whatever they damn well pleased.”

Franczyk called any demolition of the former J.N. Adam hospital “illegal and wrong and not in the public interest.”

The Council president asked state Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, D-Westchester, chair of the Assembly's Corporations, Authorities and Commissions Committee, to review the state's bidding process for the property. The lawmaker discovered several “improprieties,” Franczyk says, which is yet another reason the sale should be re-bid.

Already, several other possible buyers have expressed an interest in the J.N. Adam site, Franczyk says. The council has adopted a resolution calling for a full environmental quality review of the land, which would further delay any sale and, supporters hope, buy time for a different buyer to be found.

“Hell will freeze over before I urge my colleagues to vote for anything that doesn't preserve the buildings and respect the integrity of the natural landscape,” Franczyk says, adding that he envisions the property reborn as a college campus or artists' retreat.

The Preservation League of New York State is monitoring the J.N. Adam property and the other defunct hospitals the state is trying to sell. The J.N. Adam site is listed on the state register, but its owner-the state itself-opposed its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, despite the fact that it meets all the criteria.

“We are concerned about all of these landmark properties,” says Tania Werbizky, director of technical and grant programs at the Preservation League. “We hope that new uses can be found, and certainly, when a group comes forward trying to develop plans for the protection and reuse of a property, they should be taken very seriously and given every chance to do that.”

“There can be a win-win situation,” Werbizky says. “Certainly, the J.N. Adam hospital deserves no less.”