

The Buffalo News
By Mark Sommer
January 26, 2009

Hotel and park proposed for Richardson Complex

As plans for the Richardson Olmsted Complex evolve, board members seek public input

The Richardson Olmsted Complex, which opened more than a century ago as a sanctuary for the insane, could begin its second act with a transformation into a hotel surrounded by a public park.

The establishment of an architecture and visitors center in or near the complex's iconic twin towers is also part of a carefully evolving master plan for the long-dormant 91-acre site, which was developed in the late 19th century by architect Henry Hobson Richardson and landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted.

The master plan — still a work in progress — also has begun to coalesce around a rehabilitated landscape, including the removal of surface parking closest to the complex. The plan proposes stabilizing five stone and three brick buildings, as well as four others off the main complex while phasing in use of the site next to Buffalo State College and bordered by Forest and Elmwood avenues, Rockwell Road and Rees Street.

“I can't think of another project in Western New York that could be such a catalyst for the city and the region, because of its historical significance and its reuse potential,” said project manager David Gamble, of architecture and urban design firm Chan Krieger Sieniewicz, which heads the master plan team.

Buffalo State, which is currently developing its own long-term plan for the campus, is eventually expected to use some space for academic purposes. An economic analysis also has indicated that viable reuse options could include high-end condominiums.

The evolving plan will be discussed in the fifth public meeting at 6 p. m. Tuesday in Rockwell Hall. The meeting will be held by the Richardson Center Corp., the not-for-profit agency created in July 2006 by former Gov. George E. Pataki to chart a course for the National Historic Landmark with \$76.5 million in state funds.

“I think it's an extremely exciting concept,” said Eva Hassett, a Richardson Center board member, about using the former administration building as a hotel lobby and conference center, with 96 rooms located on three floors of two adjacent wards.

“There are amazing examples of boutique hotels in historic structures,” she added.

Hassett said an economic study has determined that a hotel would be particularly attractive for events and conferences in the immediate area where Buffalo State and the Museum District — including Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Burchfield Penney Art Center and Buffalo & Erie County

Historical Society — are located. The college indicated it would involve its hospitality program in the hotel's operation, she said.

The projected cost to stabilize and rehab the buildings and grounds, establish an architecture and visitor center and prepare the buildings to be developer- ready over the next two years is \$40 million.

Thoroughly studied

The Richardson buildings were abandoned in 1974, with the exception of the Administration Building, which was vacated in 1994. In the mid-1990s, efforts began to consolidate the Olmsted schools on the site but were shelved in 2002 due to a lack of funds.

Entrusted with writing a new history for the site, the 10- member Richardson board, headed by Buffalo News Publisher Stanford Lipsey, has sought the advice of experts from a range of fields as it moves forward.

Board members say the nonprofit Washington, D. C. based Urban Land Institute and its panel of experts — including architects, urban planners, land developers and economic development specialists — provided invaluable recommendations when they came to Buffalo in May 2006.

Many of those ideas continue to resonate, including reclaiming green space by consolidating parking to mostly perimeter ramps; rehabilitating or restoring as much as possible of the grounds and putting a hotel and residences into the renovated buildings.

Other ideas, such as using the buildings for office space, were examined and determined to be economically unfeasible.

More recently, two reports inventoried the structures and grounds and evaluated the condition of and rehabilitation costs for everything from leaky walls to damaged trees.

None of the information came cheap — the costs of the two volumes was about \$350,000, and the Urban Land Institute's tab was \$115,000. In addition, an interpretive exhibit and program concept for the architecture and visitor center, with a companion feasibility study, cost \$275,000.

Hassett said it has been money well spent.

“From the beginning, everyone has recognized the Richardson Olmsted Complex is really a treasure, and we need to treat it that way,” she said. “I think it's very clear that the master planning team has paid great attention to the excellent research.”

Francis R. Kowsky, a Richardson scholar and State University of New York distinguished professor emeritus, said the depth and thoroughness of the studies has been “extraordinary.” Kowsky, a member of the project's Community Advisory Group, said the board's approach gives him confidence that the Richardson Olmsted Complex — the first, as well as the largest, great work by America's first internationally famous architect— will be revitalized.

“It’s probably the most analyzed construction project in the history of Buffalo,” Kowsky said.

Architectural historian Martin Wachadlo said the studies have shown that the whole complex is important. An adviser on one of the reports, Wachadlo discovered early drawings for the Buffalo State Insane Asylum in the files of Buffalo Psychiatric Center that predated Richardson’s involvement.

“Originally, the general belief was that the main buildings would be saved and everything else would be torn down,” Wachadlo said. “I’m hoping now that the importance of all of the buildings in the complex will be recognized by the community at large.”

Public park

The importance of Frederick Law Olmsted’s landscape was elevated by the Urban Land Institute, which first called for the site to be known by both Richardson’s and Olmsted’s names.

Landscape scenarios developed by a consultant include changing vehicular and pedestrian pathways to re-establish Olmstedian boulevards in a parklike setting; rehabilitating the South Lawn through the elimination of parking space outside the Administration Building; and creating a new north entrance.

Tim Tielman, executive director of the Campaign for Greater Buffalo History, Art and Culture, and a member of the Community Advisory Group, has long advocated a public park on the site.

His organization recommends re-establishing Olmsted’s design, in which the entire site, including Burchfield Penney Art Center, was encircled by a continuous carriage road. It calls for restoring the landscape along Forest Avenue to the corner of Elmwood Avenue and consolidating surface parking into four brick-faced ramps no more than two or three stories tall.

One of the most important steps, Tielman said, will be to eliminate surface parking in front of the Administration Building, which would require the removal of two parking lots and part of a third.

“If they can achieve that, that will be a very important milestone, and it will show the public the potential of this,” Tielman said. “It would be eye-opening.”

Tielman has praise for the Richardson Center Corp.

“I think [the nonprofit is] a model of responsiveness to public concerns. The final proof, of course, is in the pudding, but at this stage they are much more inclusive than other projects we have worked on.”

As planning moves forward, Hassett said, Tuesday’s meeting will offer an important opportunity for the public to provide input. Documents can be viewed at www.richardsonolmsted.com. “This is a really good meeting to enter into the conversation. We want the feedback,” Hassett said.