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By Mark Sommer

Work to start on Richardson Olmsted's landmark tower

\$7.8 million in renovations to make Richardson Complex nearly tenant-ready

Renovation of the Richardson Olmsted Complex's iconic tower building and two adjacent buildings is expected to begin this summer, making the structures close to tenant-ready in about 15 months.

The site's three brick buildings also will be stabilized. In all, \$7.8 million will be spent, mostly for asbestos abatement and cleanup, ventilation, prevention of water infiltration and the sealing of walls and connectors.

The perimeter of the Richardson Olmsted Complex will be lit once electricity is restored, which is expected in the fall.

The expenditure is part of a projected \$40 million cost to stabilize and rehabilitate the buildings and grounds, make some buildings developer-ready and establish an architecture and visitors center in the tower building, which was vacated in 1994, 20 years after the rest of the complex was left dormant.

Final plans also are expected to call for a public park with less visible parking on the 91 acres surrounding the 400,000-square-foot complex.

"We are getting closer now with this next step than we ever have been to getting a tenant in there," said Julian Adams, who represents State Parks Commissioner Carol Ash on the board of the Richardson Center Corp.

The not-for-profit agency was established in July 2006, with \$76.5 million in state funds, to chart a course for the National Historic Landmark. Adams is also a senior restoration coordinator with the state Historic Preservation Office.

"After we do this stage of work in the core, the next step is getting a tenant in there and working with them to plan a project," he said. "We've come a long way from three years ago, when we said what do we have in our hands to what we have now."

Marketing consultants have suggested a boutique hotel as a good fit for the tower and adjacent buildings. Adams said the planned work will make the site that much more attractive to tenants.

“If they have to do more stabilization — or especially abatement — it adds to their bottom line. So this is really a big investment and sets the stage the best we can,” Adams said.

The level of activity on the site, along with turning on the lights, will be a further signal to the public of how plans are progressing, said Eva Hassett, a board member.

“People will be cleaning up the landscape, sealing up the buildings, regrading, taking out asbestos — this is all very visible work,” Hassett said.

Hassett noted the brick buildings are being stabilized and protected with the expectation they might not be occupied for some time.

Funds also will be used to remove dead and dying trees, and for maintenance and security.

The Richardson Center Corp.’s careful approach produced two exhaustive studies last year on the site’s historic structures and cultural landscape. The Urban Land Institute, based in Washington, D. C., was brought in in 2006 to make recommendations for reuse of the complex.

The public will get a chance to hear how the next stage of work fits into the proposed master plan at the sixth and final public meeting at 6 p.m. July 14 in Buffalo State College’s Rockwell Hall. The plan is being developed by the architecture and urban design firm Chan Krieger Sieniewicz.