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Struggle over Saint Edward: Renovate it, or tear it down?

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Developer Kevin Daniels wants the approval of the state parks commission before he proceeds with his vision for turning the badly deteriorated Saint Edward Seminary building into a hotel and spa. Some neighbors would rather see it at least partially taken down.

When developer Kevin Daniels announced plans in August to renovate the badly deteriorated 1931 seminary building at Saint Edward State Park in Kenmore and turn it into a hotel and spa, he said he knew it would involve a lengthy public process and outspoken neighbors who love their park the way it is. "I knew what I was getting into," said Daniels, who has restored several historic Seattle buildings including King Street Station and First United Methodist Church. Half a year later, Daniels says he's gotten enthusiastic feedback from many in the community and expressions of interest from potential hotel operators.

Now, he said, he needs a green light from the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, which owns the historic building and surrounding grounds, to develop the plans in earnest. "I need to have some certainty. I've gone as far as I could go," he said.

The commission plans a public hearing Feb. 9 in Kenmore on the hotel proposal and a final decision in May. To acquire the seminary, Daniels has proposed deeding to the

state 10 acres of undeveloped land immediately north of the park that includes 450 feet of Lake Washington waterfront.

In return, Daniels Real Estate would acquire the former school buildings, including a pool and gymnasium, about 5.5 acres in all. The rest of the property — about 310 acres — would remain a state park.

Opponents, who have quashed other commercial proposals for the seminary building over the past decade, say they'd rather it fall into ruin than introduce a private hotel and conference center into their tranquil park. They've collected about 2,200 signatures on a petition and posted yard signs around the community warning against "selling out St. Ed's."

Rebecca Hirt, president of Citizens for Saint Edward State Park, worries the public won't be able to enjoy the grounds around a hotel the way it does the great lawn in front of the largely abandoned building today.

"My family, can they have a game of Frisbee on the lawn? Can they picnic like they do now? We see it (the proposed hotel and spa) as changing the character of the park," Hirt said.

She and other opponents say they'd like the state to save the best-preserved parts of the building — the dining room, kitchen and bell tower — for events such as weddings or environmental education. They propose tearing down the remaining portions, perhaps leaving one exterior wall standing as a monument to the past, said Ann Hurst, a neighbor who led the effort to get the school buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fighting McMenamins

In the past few weeks, opponents have added another argument in favor of tearing most of the building down. The recently released list of 77 clergy the Archdiocese of Seattle says are admitted or credibly accused sexual abusers of children showed the perpetrators' most frequent assignment was Saint Edward Seminary. Now, said Hurst, "it could become a place of healing, more a monument than a ruin."

That argument angers Kenmore Mayor David Baker, who has championed preservation of the building. He notes the archdiocese shuttered the seminary and 40 years ago sold the property to the state, and since then, it has been a place of recreation and enjoyment.

He also points out the irony that Hurst, who secured historic designation for the site, would now rather see the building at least partially torn down.

Baker said his impression of public opinion is "the vast majority of people are strongly in favor of this. They want the building restored."



Source: ESRI, TeleAtlas MARK NOWLIN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Both supporters and opponents are pointing to the new McMenamins at the old Anderson School in Bothell, as an example of a wildly successful restoration — a historic site remade into a sprawling entertainment complex. A decade ago, McMenamins proposed restoring the Saint Edward building and opening a hotel and brew pub. Neighbors fought the plan.

Said Hurst, “I love McMenamins. I just don’t want it in a peaceful, natural park.”

Baker said not a day goes by that someone doesn’t accost him, blaming Kenmore for McMenamins’ decision to abandon its Saint Edward plan.

A Seattle Times story from 2007 says the company withdrew in part because of neighborhood opposition, but also because Kenmore adopted an ordinance prohibiting liquor in parks.

Building’s best chance?

Once the recession hit, state funding plummeted, from about 70 percent of the parks’ budget to 25 percent in 2015, said Virginia Painter, parks spokeswoman. The Legislature mandated that the agency find more revenue to sustain the parks system, she said.

In 2014, the Parks Commission concluded it didn’t have the estimated \$14 million to \$16 million needed to address deferred maintenance and bring the seminary up to seismic and safety codes. It directed staff to either find a partner within a year to finance a rehabilitation or vacate the 90,000-square-foot building

In September, the commission agreed to a one-year delay so Daniels could explore the feasibility of his plan, which would preserve the building’s Art Deco character and architectural details. He also plans to add about 70 parking spaces near the hotel. Existing public parking would be reconfigured by the state, without a loss in the number of spaces, said Michael Hankinson, parks planner.

After the Feb. 9 hearing, the commission will review the public comments and an appraisal of the lakefront acreage Daniels wants to exchange for the seminary building.

Under state law, to approve a land exchange, the seven-member commission’s decision must be unanimous.

Not all the neighbors are against the hotel and spa proposal. Gary Sharp grew up in Kenmore, raised his family there and said he now walks the parks’ trails almost every day. He said Daniels’ proposal represents the best chance for saving what he called “a beautiful building.”

He contrasted the more urban setting of McMenamins — in downtown Bothell near new apartments and other development — with Saint Edward State Park, with its more private location up a long, winding drive. The park’s 316 acres of woods, trails and open space, he said, provide “more than enough room for everyone.

“I think this is the best thing that could happen,” Sharp said.