

City rejects repair plan for former bank

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Commission says firm's proposal to use alternative materials would damage building rather than restore it

The Port Washington Plan Commission last week rejected a proposal by Port Harbor Investments to use different materials than those previously approved to repair the former M&I Bank building on Franklin Street in downtown Port.

Commission members said the materials proposed by the firm would not match the facade of the existing building and would cause additional damage to the structure.

"This process is actually harmful to the building," commission member Bud Sova said. "The materials don't match the masonry, and they are not materials conducive to that application in a historic building."

The city has been trying to get the firm to repair the former bank for several years, since early renovation attempts left the building in shambles.

The city repeatedly tried to get the owners to fix the building. Last fall, officials called it an eyesore and safety hazard and filed a lawsuit hoping to force the firm to repair the structure.

The investment firm recently signed a stipulation agreeing to, among other things, fix the building facade with materials approved by the Plan Commission by July 16.

Randy Tetzlaff, the city's director of planning and development, said the firm wanted to use injected molded polymer brick panels on the parapet wall instead of the reinforced fiberglass resin originally approved for the work.

"They're looking for a short-term, less-expensive solution," Tetzlaff said, noting the firm's ultimate goal is to raze the building.

Tetzlaff said he talked to architects and design professionals on the city's Design Review Board and the Port Washington Main Street design committee, and none of them believed the proposed materials should be allowed.

Instead, Tetzlaff said, they recommended 12-by-24-inch white exterior tiles be used for the work.

"The opinion is that this is not a suitable material," he said. "There are other reasonable alternatives."

"I think they're trying to play down the middle of the road. That's not where we want to be," commission member Ron Voigt said. "I think they fix it up or they tear it down."

Mayor Scott Huebner, the commission chairman, expressed frustration with the situation. When

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the firm purchased the building in late 2007 and talked to city officials and residents about their plans, he said, they promised a quality project.

“One of the principals even said he’d sell his house if it didn’t make the city better,” Huebner said. “Now they’re coming back and trying to put cheap plastic materials on a historic building.

“What they originally said and what they’re trying to do are complete opposites.”

Representatives of Port Harbor Investments could not be reached for comment.