

Flipping the Big House: Pennsylvania renewing efforts to sell the closed Western Penitentiary on the North Side



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Another move is afoot to try to sell the closed State Correctional Institution Pittsburgh on the North Side, two years after Manchester Bidwell Corp. backed out of a deal to buy it.

State Sen. Wayne Fontana, D-Brookline, has advanced legislation that would set up a competitive process to accept proposals for the sale of the 20.2-acre property in the Marshall-Shadeland neighborhood.

The bill, which has been approved by the Senate, also involves the sale of the former warden's house at 3561 Shadeland Ave. about a mile from the old prison. A couple has offered to buy the house for \$140,000.

Unlike the warden's home, there is no sale pending for the prison, once known as Western Penitentiary.

But Mr. Fontana and state Rep. Jake Wheatley, D-Hill District, who is overseeing the bill in the House, believe the site could attract the attention of potential developers.

"We think we have several interested parties that could make something significant happen at that site," said Mr. Wheatley, whose district includes the old prison closed in 2017.

The property has been in limbo since September 2017 when Manchester Bidwell Corp. voided an agreement it had with the state to buy the former correctional facility.

It did so after conducting what it described as an "extensive due diligence process on the premises that included expert opinions, discussions with programmatic consultants, and tests from developers and environmental specialists." At the time, a Manchester Bidwell spokesman said there wasn't one thing in particular that caused the change of heart.

Mr. Fontana, whose district also includes Western Pen, and Mr. Wheatley acknowledged that there is work that needs to be done to make the

property more marketable. That likely includes asbestos and soil remediation issues that need to be resolved, Mr. Fontana said.

He and Mr. Wheatley are hoping to get funding from Gov. Tom Wolf to help with such efforts.

The state, Mr. Wheatley said, should “take the first step to do some of these predevelopment things, and then we can see what the private market has in store for us.”

Beyond that, the COVID-19 pandemic hasn’t helped efforts to market the property. Before it hit, a group from New York had an interest in perhaps turning the site into an entertainment center, Mr. Fontana said.

“With the pandemic, they kind of bailed,” he explained, adding that COVID-19 “has actually delayed everything and took the interest away.”

While some of that interest now appears to be rekindling, it hasn’t reached the serious stage, Mr. Fontana acknowledged.

“There are people who want to see it, look at it and tour it,” he said. “That’s about it.”

Nonetheless, the state legislator — a real estate broker by trade — has been relying on that experience to try to drum up prospects.

Mr. Fontana said he once pitched the site to the Pittsburgh Riverhounds before the soccer team landed at Highmark Stadium at Station Square. He also has talked to organizations developing medical marijuana facilities — and to just about anyone else with ears.

“I ask everybody, and you see what happens,” he said. “You never know, right?”

Mr. Fontana said the prison contains some historical elements that may have to be preserved. The prison, with its imposing walls, was built from 1876 to 1882 by architect E.M. Butz. Over the years, additional administrative and work spaces have been added.

Some believe any rehabilitative or adaptive reuse could be costly, given the nature of the construction. At minimum, the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation has said in the past, the long wall that faces the Ohio River should be saved.

Whatever happens at the site, Mr. Wheatley stressed, will be done in consultation with the community, including the Brightwood Civic Group, which represents the Marshall-Shadeland neighborhood.

The legislation requires the creation of a “competitive solicitation committee” to review any proposals for the property and to recommend a buyer. That committee would not only include the state General Services secretary or a designee and legislative members but “an official representative of the municipality in which the property is located.”

Mr. Wheatley said he wanted to create a process where community voices “could be at the table to be part of the decision making, start to finish.”

When SCI Pittsburgh closed, the community was vocal, he noted, about the loss of jobs and the loss of taxes. It also was clear in those discussions that whatever is developed at the site should be placed on the tax rolls and produces jobs.

“They don’t want a nonprofit taking over down there. They want to work with the city, the county and the state to see what kind of private interest is

available,” he said.

“I think they’re open to anything as long as they’re part of it and part of the decision-making tree.”

Angel Gober, president of the Brightwood Civic Group board of directors, said the organization is seeking a visioning planning process related to the redevelopment. It wants to “actually partner with a developer of our choice who can implement the community’s vision for the neighborhood,” she said.

What the group wants to avoid, she emphasized, is a reuse that doesn’t have community input or buy-in, as well as one that doesn’t benefit the Marshall-Shadeland neighborhood or the North Side as a whole.

The legislation did not list a price for the property. It requires the Department of General Services to select the proposal that “offers the best value and return on investment.”

“In making the determination, the Department of General Services may consider, in addition to price, the proposed use of the property, job creation, return to the property tax rolls and other criteria specified in the solicitation documents,” it said.

The only thing the legislation bars from being considered is a casino or another type of gambling facility, Mr. Fontana said.

Troy Thompson, a General Services spokesman, said the prison is being maintained at a cost of about \$600,000 a year, which is being paid by the state Department of Corrections.

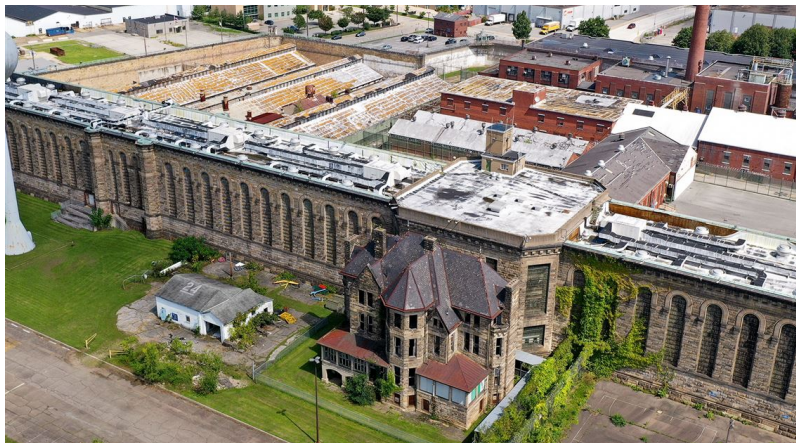
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And while that has helped generate some activity, Mr. Wheatley sees even better days ahead for Western Pen.

“I think we have the pieces in place to really bring it back,” he said.

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