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Housing groups buy Woolson Block

SPRINGFIELD — It's official: The landmark Woolson Block is now owned by a partnership of the Springfield Housing Authority and Housing Vermont, which have plans to completely renovate the run-down 1868 downtown block.

Bill Morlock, executive director of the Springfield Housing Authority, said Thursday the closing on the building was held Oct. 14, with the sale completed for \$200,000.

He said the two nonprofit housing agencies formed a third group, Springfield Housing Unlimited, to own the building and manage its renovation.

Morlock said it would likely be a year before anything happens to the building, which is vacant and occupies a prime corner in downtown Springfield.

He said Springfield Housing Unlimited is having an architect evaluate the building and draw up detailed plans, which will allow them to apply for state and federal funding for the renovation.

He said the project is estimated to cost \$4.5 million to \$5 million.

"We finally own the building," said Morlock, who had bought the building during a tax sale in August 2015.

He said the building had finally been made secure, and he said three people who were living there as squatters had finally moved out.

The building will have to remain vacant for at least a year, rather than house temporary tenants, Morlock said, because of health and safety code problems that had put the former owner at loggerheads with state inspectors.

The former owner was E.J. Cully of Killington.

Under Cully's ownership, the condition of the building had deteriorated, and its tenants had attracted the attention of the police and town government. At one point, the town passed an ordinance aimed at keeping the building's tenants from smoking in front of the building because it was close to the town library.

Town officials also said they were concerned the smokers on the sidewalk might be dealing drugs.

The last commercial tenant in the block, the JennyWren Cafe, closed earlier this year because of problems with the landlord.

Town Manager Tom Yenerell said another year of having a vacant building was well worth the price of undertaking the ambitious renovation. The two housing groups had earlier collaborated on the renovation of the Ellis Block, which includes the renovated Springfield movie theater.

Morlock said architects from Black River Designs of Montpelier were working on plans, and he said that officials from the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation toured the building with the architects this week.

The Italianate-style building is part of Springfield's downtown historic district on the Federal Register of Historic Places.

The 1868, three-story building was designed by Montpelier architect George Guernsey for three Springfield businessmen: Amasa Woolson, who was one of the owners of the Jones & Lamson Machine Tool Co., Frederick Parks and Horace Thompson, according to the nominating petition to put the Springfield downtown district on the National Register.

Morlock said the building would maintain its commercial and retail space on the ground floor, while the second floor would be renovated to accommodate at-risk youth in apartments, overseen by a manager. The top floor would also include apartments.

"It's not a concern," Yenerell said of the block being vacant in the interim. "It would be great if construction could start sooner. This is such a large project, the design of the final project needs to be done before funding can be secured."

He added, "I'm certain it will be worth it."

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