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COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

Bids sought for ultimate property flip: the old Pawtucket/Central Falls station



The 1916 Pawtucket/Central Falls train station once offered a grand and elegant experience for travelers. Now the privately-owned building represents an eyesore and safety hazard.

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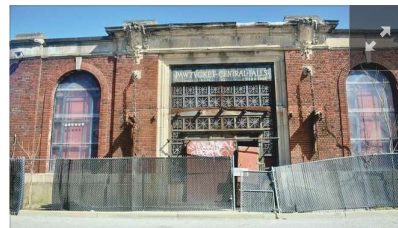
The once-grand Pawtucket-Central Falls station stands covered in graffiti, filled with trash and frequented by trespassers. Over the years, a series of private owners neglected to secure the property, leaving it open to squatters and vandals. Now, a Providence lawyer is seeking proposals from developers to redevelop the historic train station that spans the two cities.

John A. Dorsey, a court-appointed special master, has assembled a bid package and is now advertising the building as a redevelopment opportunity

Pawtucket Mayor Donald Grebien and Central Falls Mayor Maria Rivera petitioned a judge to appoint a receiver after a series of private owners failed to board up the site, despite court orders to secure the property. Over the summer, Superior Court Associate Justice Brian P. Stern named Dorsey to the role.

“I’ve been working with the two cities to come up with a plan to deal with the immediate health and safety issues at the building,” Dorsey told the Business Journal. “Now my job is to find a buyer.”

The station was unveiled in 1916 for passengers on the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad. It closed in 1959 in poor condition, and it’s been downhill from there.



The old Pawtucket-Central Falls train station as seen in mid-2021.

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Various development projects were proposed but never came to fruition. Part of the property was used as a flea

market for several years. Ownership has changed several times, and portions were sold off, leaving the property with an unclear ownership structure. Recent local enforcement orders have been sent to a New Jersey-based LLC.

Interim steps 'to deter access'

Records from across the decades show reports of drug overdoses, trash fires, rat infestations and homeless encampments associated with the property. Despite numerous enforcement orders and litigation, property owners appeared to take little or no action. At times, debris fell from the building onto the Amtrak train tracks below, according to the records filed with court documents.

During a recent visit, the building still remained open to the elements and accessible to trespassers. Asked why, Dorsey said securing the old train station is no simple matter. Traditional methods tried by city officials – including plywood over windows and new locks and chains on the doors – have failed. "People pry them right off," he remarked. "We're developing interim steps to deter access. And we're working on a plan to permanently board it up pending sale and redevelopment."

Meanwhile, construction continues on the nearby brand-new, \$47 million Pawtucket-Central Falls commuter rail station. The station and bus hub are set to open next year, connecting passengers to Boston, Providence and Rhode Island T.F. Green International Airport. A new transit-oriented development district was formed to attract real estate investment and spur renovation of nearby historic mills.

Both mayors have said the building represents a burden to taxpayers and is a safety threat to city workers and the public.

"The old train station was becoming a site of overdoses and fires, putting the lives of our residents and firefighters in jeopardy, as well as the Amtrak cars below," Rivera said on

Thursday. "We have faith that the court process can help find solutions to this decades-old problem."

Judges may appoint so-called "special masters" to manage the disposition of privately owned blighted properties when there is a strong public interest at stake, Dorsey said. He confirmed that the current ownerships still has "skin in the game" and liability, but that he has power to control the next steps of the property's sale and redevelopment. Dorsey would get paid from the proceeds of the sale.

Dorsey said his plan is to get the building secured, sort out the title issues, cut through red tape, bring parties to the table and in other ways facilitate the redevelopment process. He declined to describe a timeline, but said he intends to help expedite matters. "We'll come up with a solution that's backed by the courts," Dorsey said.

Asked if redeveloping the building is economically feasible, Dorsey said a good team armed with state, federal and local economic development incentives could make it work. Demolition is not off the table, he added, but he'll wait and see who responds to the bid opportunity.

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