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Our view: County, preservationists both have work to do

St. Louis County has been trying to sell the building that used to house its jail. (File / News Tribune)

By playing up its dilapidated condition and by charging a deposit for tours, St. Louis County actually is discouraging the sale of its historic-but-abandoned downtown Duluth jail. That was the charge leveled by the Duluth Heritage Preservation

Commission.

The claim made headlines this past week, prompting St. Louis County Commissioner Chris Dahlberg to predict preservationists “are going to go for a lawsuit.

“I question the tone,” Dahlberg told the News Tribune editorial page. “It seems they’re setting us up so they can say at the end of the day we didn’t do our job, that we didn’t do what we were supposed to do.”

Both sides — and what a shame there are “sides” when saving history while unburdening taxpayers is what’s at stake — were invited to write the commentaries published on today’s page.

Both make valid points. The county’s online virtual tour features images of standing water and debris inside while downplaying views and majestic marble details outside, as preservationists point out. But the county has been trying for more than 20 years to find a new use for the old building, as Dahlberg argues.

But rather than sniping back and forth, the preservationists and the county could both be focusing their energies on finding someone, anyone, willing to take on a building no one seems to want to use — or lose.

It was constructed 86 years ago as part of Duluth’s Civic Center, designed by celebrated architect Daniel Burnham. On the National Register of Historic Places, the Civic Center remains one of Minnesota’s premiere examples of the City Beautiful Movement of the early 1900s.

The county used the jail for more than 60 years, moving out its last prisoners in 1995 after the state issued stringent new standards for lockups the old jail couldn’t meet.

Its roof leaks. Chunks of exterior façade have fallen off. The only stairway is too narrow to meet code. The elevator is too small to be legal. Plumbing and electrical systems are outdated. Upper floors are so weak they can’t even be used to store documents. And the jail was built as a jail; fears persist that if bars and cells are removed as part of renovations, the building could collapse.

Potential new uses for the building have included apartments, museum, law office, and even a bed-and-breakfast. But each possibility halted at the same financial reality, that the cost of renovating was at least three times the cost of building new. Investors “could never get a return on their investment,” Duluth real estate developer Lance Reasor said in March after touring the jail and deciding its renovation was “doable” but too costly for him.

This year the county finally said, “Enough,” a decision that could be applauded by taxpayers footing the bill at a clip of \$2,000 a month for insurance, inspections and occasional repairs. The county applied for a demolition permit. The city of Duluth rejected the application before recanting and issuing a Nov. 15 deadline for the county to make one last “good-faith” effort to save the structure.

The county put up an oversized for-sale sign outside the jail and posted a dizzying amount of information and documentation on its Web site, touting the building’s history and pointing out its challenges. But it still hasn’t received a legitimate offer.

Now, 18 weeks from deadline, from that date in November when taxpayers are finally freed from the jail, county officials, preservationists and others can’t afford to waste a moment sniping at each other. All energies could instead be focused on spreading the word:

Jail for sale.

History at stake.

Taxpayers tired of footing the bill.

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