

Report says Cornell building deserves to be saved

BY *Tim Rowland*

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WESTPORT | A new architectural report indicates the historic Cornell Building at the Essex County Fairgrounds could be refurbished for \$1.8 million, a sum that appears to be relatively affordable considering the amount of grant money the project tentatively has on hand.

But a debate over the building's future continued at a Monday, May 2, committee meeting, as there is still disagreement among Essex County Supervisors as to whether the century-old structure should be renovated, or torn down and rebuilt.

The county's Buildings and Facilities Committee members finally agreed to do their own architectural study based for an accurate comparison of the competing proposals.

The latest report, written by Crawford and Stearns, an architectural and preservation firm based in Syracuse, says "we believe that this historical building can be successfully renovated to full function at roughly the same cost (as new), if not less."

It calls the building "special and unique," and notes that it is one piece of a larger historical landscape as part of the greater Essex County fairgrounds complex.

But advocates for new construction, including Supervisors Chair Shaun Gilliland, said the new report only accounts for preservation of the building, and not for its practical use. Gilliland said the building must be

commodious to modern teaching and commercial applications, and include amenities such as a greenhouse and a commercial kitchen.

"Yes, preservation is nice, but we have requirements for citizens and needs of the

be done for the stated price. "I would never recommend spending \$1.8 million on a building that we'll have to come back to in five years" for more work, Palmer said.

The county over the past year has worked

to teaching opportunities for kids, as would be permitted by a greenhouse.

But the Cornell Building has strong advocates in the Town of Westport, including Supervisor Iker Tyler, the historical society and the Westport Chamber of Commerce. If the goal is to attract people to the fairgrounds, the chamber said in a letter submitted to the board last week, it should consider the strong allure of architectural tourism.

"Tearing it down and replacing it will destroy part of Essex County's cultural and historic legacy and convey the message that our history, culture, and architecturally significant structures are not important," the chamber wrote.

There also seems to be increasing sentiment on the board for saving the building in one form or another, a change that reflects a new group of supervisors elected to office in November. Town of Jay Supervisor Matt Stanley said the fairgrounds was an important part of his childhood when he raised dairy cows for 4-H, and it's a memory he wants to project onto future generations.

The county currently has in the neighborhood of \$1.5 million in grants that are penciled in for the Cornell Building, and could be used either for renovation or building new. The county also has a substantial pool of money left from last year's federal stimulus allocation.

Advocates for saving the building believe there is room and funding to preserve the building while adding more modern facilities. "We can do both if we want to," Tyler said. "This could be a beautiful project for the county." ■



A new report says the Cornell fairgrounds building in Westport could be renovated for \$1.8 million.

Photo by *Tim Rowland*

county that should take precedence over preservation," Gilliland said.

County Manager Dan Palmer noted that the renovation plan does not include many perks of modern construction, and that he's not convinced all the necessary work could

to turn the fairgrounds — which it views as underutilized — into a more desirable destination and venue for a broader range of events. To maximize that potential, some on the board believe a new building will be better suited to groups that require ample kitchen space, and