



Our view: Make Rutger Park a historic package

Observer-Dispatch

Posted Apr 18, 2010 @ 09:00 PM

Last update Apr 19, 2010 @ 05:26 PM

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A cursory look at Utica's past will find that many of its historic treasures were lost to the wrecking ball. Among them: Vice President James Schoolcraft Sherman's stately home on Genesee Street, demolished in the 1940s, and the venerable City Hall, designed by renowned architect Richard Upjohn and razed in the 1960s to make way for urban renewal.

Today's leaders cannot make amends for past travesties. But they have an opportunity to salvage a key part of Utica's history with the pending sale of the former Swancott Home on historic Rutger Park.

They must seize that opportunity and make certain this property remains part of a parcel that could one day become a centerpiece to showcase the region's history.

This past week, the Rescue Mission of Greater Utica confirmed that the property it owns at 4 Rutger Park will go on the auction block next month. The Rescue Mission had originally planned to turn it into a rehabilitation center, but that plan met with strong community opposition, and last August, the city's Zoning Board of Appeals denied the request.

This provides an opportunity to add another piece to the historic collection of 19th-century mansions on Rutger Park, once home to U.S. Sen. Roscoe Conkling, one of the most powerful political leaders in the nation during the Reconstruction period. Last year, a private property owner sold the buildings at 1 and 3 Rutger Park, and the lot at 2 Rutger Park to the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica. The society has since been awarded a \$600,000 state grant toward its goal of creating "mansion museums" there. Plans to create a neighboring rehab center would have been a blemish on those plans.

But now, No. 4 can be added to the fold, and that opportunity mustn't be allowed to slip away. The three-story brick mansion was built in 1854 for Egbert Bagg, a civil engineer and land surveyor, who considered it a prime example of the best Italian architecture. It became the Swancott Home in 1955, a care facility for elderly women, and was sold to the Rescue Mission in 2008.

If this isn't part of Mayor Roefaro's soon-to-be-released master plan, it should be. He should lead a campaign to bring together the area's federal, state and local leaders with members of the Landmarks Society to find the financial means to create a historic Rutger Park campus. Its row of mansions and park-like front yards could not only be a centerpiece for showcasing the city's — and region's — history, but it could become a catalyst for renewal in that entire neighborhood. That work already has begun as private owners buy and restore these once-elegant homes to their former grandeur; a restored Rutger Park would only serve to encourage others.

The potential is there. What's needed now is the vision and the cooperative effort to turn it into a reality.

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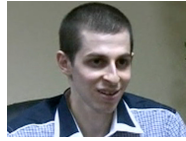
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