

City a trailblazer in delivery of senior service

Recent community discussions over potential use of La Crosse city-owned properties for emergency winter shelters has sparked renewed and reasonable concerns over eventual use of one specific property: 1607 North St.



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A year has elapsed since the city provided a draft of a purchase agreement to the Harry J. Olson Board of Directors for purchase of the city building at 1607 North St. The agreement outlined the conditions under which the city would essentially gift the building to the organization for \$1.

It was January 2016 when the city council unanimously approved a resolution to end leases at two city buildings rented by private groups for senior activities. The leases were to terminate at the end of 2020 with an option for the council to renew the leases if desired. The resolution referenced an earlier recommendation by the Board of Public Works for

the two buildings to be sold for \$1.00 to the leaseholders or be declared surplus property and put up for sale on the open market. In July 2019, the city council declared the former Southside Senior Center at 1222 Denton St. to be surplus property. However, no decision was made on the building at 1607 North St.

When I took office in April 2021, moves to address the future of the property at 1607 North St. had still not occurred. The lease had simply expired without any apparent plan on next steps. At my direction, nine days after taking office, work on a \$1 purchase agreement began and was provided to the organization later that year. Conditions of the property transfer required, among other things, that the Harry J. Olson Board maintain the building as a polling place for 15 years and that city taxpayers be justly and fairly compensated should the organization decide to sell the building in the near future at a hefty profit.

At first, agreement stipulations from the city were considered acceptable. However,

the city was then informed that the organization was unaware that it would have, under state law, property tax obligations and therefore requested additional concessions. A potential extended lease arrangement was also considered but rejected by the organization.

In January of this year, I invited representatives of the group to join me in discussing a potential path forward to expedite the property transfer. Talks after that meeting were not successful. The city's Board of Public Works voted in February to officially terminate any claim to the lease that had expired at the end of 2020 and proceed with eviction procedures unless an agreement to finalize the sale could be completed by the end of May. In May, after additional concessions by the city, the organization's representative refused to negotiate further. Since then, we have witnessed demonstrably false public claims by some about agreement stipulations and other aspects of these negotiations.

I do not have the liberty of shirking the responsibility of

enforcing the decisions made by city governing bodies and ensuring the investments of La Crosse taxpayers are protected. The purchase agreement that was offered accomplishes both in a fair and equitable manner. I had hoped to provide this organization with an opportunity to stay in the building with this agreement. However, the city is under no current obligation to do so. The city council voted nearly seven years ago to end the lease on the building at 1607 North St. at the end of 2020. No other city council action has been taken since.

The Harry J. Olson organization operates as a private entity with, at the last count the city was provided, more than a third of its members who do not live in the city of La Crosse. Meanwhile the city's Parks and Recreation Department continues to provide comprehensive and equitable senior programming at multiple sites for citizens of our community at a cost of around \$250,000 annually. This programming is open to all and not restricted to dues-paying members of a pri-

ate club. The city also provides two meal sites in conjunction with the La Crosse County Senior Nutrition Program. In addition, the city's library system provides significant programming for seniors. Finally, under my direction, our city's transit system just recently began providing service to the Eagle Crest Community near Gundersen to help create more pathways for our senior citizens to access these services.

The city has repeatedly invited members of the Harry J. Olson organization to visit our community centers and learn more about our programming. These programs have grown substantially over the last few years and continue to improve services to all seniors in La Crosse. The city has, in truth, become a trailblazer when it comes to delivery of senior services.

I would invite any who are interested — especially, like me, those over 50 — to see for themselves what our city programming looks like and to speak with the hundreds who take advantage of those programs every day.