

BUSINESS

# Developer Russ Haims says Becker buildings worth saving and protecting



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WORCESTER — Russ Haims bought 24 buildings and three parking lots at Becker College for \$10 million in October, and said he believed the Becker buildings were worth saving and needed to be protected.

Since then, Haims, owner of Worcester-based developer Hampton Properties, has sold three of the buildings — renovated professors' offices — as single-family homes and plans to sell three more.

The homes range from 3,000 to 8,000 square feet, the biggest formerly serving as the president's office.

Haims sold two homes in November and January and one in late February, located on Roxbury Street and William Street.

Four of the buildings along Roxbury Street will be sold and redeveloped by Taylor Bearden, a partner at Civico Development.

While the properties have been removed from tax-exempt status and will generate revenue in property taxes, the city was not able to provide information regarding how much in annual taxes the properties will generate or an estimate on the property taxes until the tax bills go out in mid-April.

Haims said he plans to put the remaining houses on the market by spring and sell all the properties over the next few months, not wanting to “drag this out.”

"They're significant structures and beautiful properties that were once grand homes," he said. "The architectural character and space in that Elm Park neighborhood is gorgeous. Everyone that visits and owns property there loves it because of its proximity to the park, green space — it's got a lot of quality to it that you won't find in every city."

Besides selling the single-family homes, Haims' main focus is renovating a number of dormitories that he's agreed to lease to Worcester Polytechnic Institute as student housing.

Since last summer WPI has leased three dormitory buildings from Haims in an area it calls South Village along Sever Street, in buildings Haims said he owned before the Becker sale.

Haims said WPI reached out to him last year through Becker with interest in leasing the extra housing space. The remaining dorms will be occupied by WPI beginning in August.

"I think (the city) likes the fact that I've purchased properties that were previously off the tax rolls for decades and now are going to be taxable properties," he said. "Even if I'm renting them to WPI they're still owned by a for-profit organization, so they'll now stay on the tax rolls."

## **City stakes its claim**

At the same time Haims bought Becker property, the city also took its pick of buildings along Sever Street, buying 51, 61 and 69 Sever St. for \$4.5 million.

Julie Lynch, chief of the city's Department of Public Facilities, said 51 and 61 Sever St. are being leased to Worcester State University (WSU) and Clark University, respectively.

WSU moved its nursing program to 51 Sever St. while Clark took over Becker's gaming program at 61 Sever St.

Both leases run until May 2023, Lynch said, though Clark has requested an extension of its lease until December 2023.

According to city records, the city has received \$231,155 in rental income from the universities since the beginning of their leases. Clark pays \$28,423 in monthly rent and WSU pays \$25,781.

Revenue from the WSU and Clark leases is being used to fund repairs to the buildings as needed and for anticipated construction costs, Lynch said.

The city plans to begin renovation on the 51 and 61 Sever St. buildings over the 2023 summer in preparation for using the buildings for its own departments.

"By moving out of buildings that require a lot of maintenance, I think the city manager is trying to develop a plan that's financially in the city's best interest, but also a plan that will ultimately function better for the citizens," Lynch said.

According to Lynch, 51 Sever St. would be used for the city's Public Health Department, consolidating different branches within Public Health in one building.

Located at 61 Sever St., Becker's former William F. Ruska library would be a city archive, a center for rare documents and artifacts from the city's history dating back to the 1700s.

The upper level of the building will be occupied by the Fanning Adult Learning Center, currently located at 24 Chatham St.

Tennis courts and a small wood building sat at 69 Sever St. Now the tennis courts have been replaced with a grassy area, with the potential to be turned into a park.

## **Preserving historic Becker buildings**

A number of Becker buildings are at a preservation level and can be found on the National Register of Historic Places as part of a wide historic district. Haims said he had a hearing before the Worcester Historical Commission when requesting approval for work on the exterior of some of his buildings.

City Archive at former Becker library will make Worcester's history available to public

Lynch said City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. saw the Becker buildings as an opportunity to expand the city's reach within a historic Worcester site.

"He's trying to look at the city holistically and make decisions about better ways to consolidate and run departments," Lynch said. "I think they saw this as an opportunity to do that."

## **Getting rid of what's left behind**

After Becker closed, furniture and classroom items were abandoned inside the college's ivy-covered walls. For Haims, the challenge with owning these properties has become the overwhelming volume of items he has to find a place for.

Computer desks, chairs, bookshelves, conference tables, file cabinets — hundreds of items litter the buildings, and so far Haims' efforts to donate the items have made a small dent in the inventory, he said, referring to the process as a "headache."

"We've been donating a ton of furniture and supplies because we inherited fully furnished offices, and we've sought out different nonprofits and churches and schools in the city, but we still have a large amount of items that have yet to be taken," Haims said. "I'm surprised it's taken as long as it has for people to take free stuff that are usable and needed. It's very strange to me that we're still hanging on to these things and making repeated calls to get these things out of here."

Haims said he has donated items to Worcester schools, Habitat for Humanity and St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Cathedral.

Lynch said the city hasn't worked with Haims but appreciates the progress he has made on the Becker buildings.

"He's been very kind and gracious, offering us furniture from some of the buildings that he bought," she said. "It's a lot to take on all of a sudden."