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Watchtower's Move to Warwick? 'Not Any Time Soon'

by Linda Collins (linda@brooklyneagle.net), published online 10-24-2011

Meanwhile, Additional Property Acquired in Nearby Tuxedo, N.Y.

By Linda Collins
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

BROOKLYN HEIGHTS — In response to all the media interest in when the Jehovah's Witnesses will be moving out of Brooklyn Heights, the religious organization can only say, "It won't be any time soon."

The focus in Crain's New York Business and then other media last week was on the potential beneficiaries of all the properties the Witnesses (also known as the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society) will be vacating with the planned move of their world headquarters to Warwick, N.Y.

But as Richard Devine, who is in charge of real property for the religious organization, told the Eagle, "We still don't have approval to build at Warwick."

He added, "We will be delivering our final EIR [Environmental Impact Report] within the next couple of weeks."

The Town of Warwick will then have to review it, approve it and issue the required special-use permit. Only then



Corcoran has the listing for this Watchtower building at 165 Columbia Heights.



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can construction — as well as remediation — begin. So the move will likely be years away, according to Devine. The site will have to be remediated. Last year, Devine described it as originally built 50 years ago for the International Nickel Co. (now known as INCO) for its research and development division. The company closed that division in 1983.

Since then it has been owned by King's College, which had received approvals for its plan to develop a 1,600-student campus there; and then by Touro College.

"We actually bought it from Touro College," Devine said last year.

According to Town of Warwick documents, plans for the Jehovah's Witnesses' world headquarters include the construction of eight new buildings in conjunction with the four existing buildings on 30 acres on a site totaling 257 acres, most of which is forest and wetlands.

The campus buildings will include a three-to-four-story, 195,000-square-foot office building and place of worship; a three-to-four-story, 137,000-square-foot service building with kitchen, laundry and support functions; four five-story residential structures totaling 400,000 square feet; a two-story 100,000-square-foot maintenance shop; a three-level parking garage; and additional smaller buildings, including a vehicle repair shop (for onsite vehicles), a heating/cooling/generator house and a recreation building.

As the Eagle reported in 2010, the buildings are intended to be sustainable and eco-friendly.

Among the town's concerns before the final EIR could be approved were whether the construction would impact the adjacent forest and wetlands and whether the new buildings could be seen from various viewpoints in the Sterling Forest State Park, on the Sterling Ridge Trail and on the Appalachian Trail.

"The new buildings, despite covering more land area, constitute minimal additional visual impact to the general area," the town's analysis concluded.

No renderings are available yet, according to Devine, but the New York City firm Perkins Eastman Architects was selected to design the new world headquarters project.

Organization Buys Another Property

In the meantime, the Witnesses have acquired more property near Warwick.

As reported recently in the Times Herald-Record of the Hudson Valley, the organization has acquired the former International Paper Co. building and 50 acres of land in Tuxedo, N.Y., for \$3.2 million. The new also-vacant site is about six miles from the world headquarters property.

The newspaper's source was Steve Perfit of the Cushman and Wakefield-Pyramid Brokerage Co., the firm that represented Watchtower in the deal.

Watchtower intends to use this new site to support construction efforts at the Warwick property.

"It seemed ideally suited for staging a lot of the temporary construction facilities we would need in order to build the site down the road," Devine told the Times Herald-Record. "It seemed like a good fit for us." Longterm plans for the International Paper property are not known.

The Watchtower had also submitted a proposal for a 248-acre site in nearby Ramapo, acquired in 2009. "We are not pursuing that application just now," Devine said.

Heights, DUMBO Properties

The Witnesses have 34 properties totaling 3.4 million square feet to be disposed of in the Heights and DUMBO. According to Devine, four are parking lots, 17 are residential buildings and 13 are buildings that are in manufacturing zones, including its world headquarters complex at 25 and 30 Columbia Heights and the tower at 90 Sands St. that is zoned as a hotel.

Calling it a complex, Devine said the corporate headquarters is actually a five-building complex totaling approximately 700,000 square feet.

As Devine has noted, all plans to move the headquarters to Warwick do not take into account the current state of the real estate market.

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“We are using all our buildings,” he said, “and the business of the organization goes on.”

That’s with the exception of the eight that are currently on the market, of course.

“These are vacant or will be delivered vacant,” said Devine.

As the Eagle reported in August and September, those eight buildings — all residential — are three being handled by Massey Knakal Realty Services totaling \$18.45 million, including 50 Orange St., and 161 and 183 Columbia Heights; and five being handled by The Corcoran Group totaling \$18.8 million, including 34 Orange St., 67 Remsen St., 76 and 105 Willow St., and 165 Columbia Heights.

The properties’ appeal has already become evident. Ellen Newman of Corcoran said she has had dozens of showings.

Massey Knakal also reports a high level of interest.

“Every type of buyer is interested: developers looking to convert the properties to condo, institutions that want to use the properties or rent them out,” said Robert Knakal, chairman of the brokerage.

Both brokers note that the buildings are in pristine condition, something the Watchtower organization is known for.

Helping the Neighborhood

The organization is also known for helping its surrounding neighborhood, which included building a park in Brooklyn.

The Times Herald-Record reported that in the Ulster County town of Shawangunk, where the Witnesses have property in the hamlet of Walkkill, they helped the town demolish and rebuild its town hall.

The organization has its printing facilities in Walkkill as well as a farm.

“We do beef farming for the table and also fruits and vegetables that grow well up there,” Devine said.

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