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## Live or let die?

### Cook County Hospital is shuttered, but its fate remains unclear.

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To hear Cook County Board President John Stroger and his allies tell it, the empty 89-year-old Cook County Hospital is a huge white elephant, and a decrepit one at that. The terra cotta facade, they say, is about to fall off. The costs of improving its electrical, heating and cooling systems are out of sight. And the basement -- well, it's not much more than a crawl space.

Developer Harold Lichterman has heard those dire descriptions, but, after touring the 2-block-long structure late last month, he says he hasn't been scared off from devising a plan to preserve the building.

"I was surprised to see the excellent shape it was in," Lichterman says as he sits behind his desk in his modest office on Halsted Street a couple of blocks north of North Avenue. "I didn't see anything in there that would be daunting."

Lichterman's walls are decorated with construction and design honors, including one signed by Mayor Richard M. Daley, a 2001 Chicago Landmark Award for Preservation Excellence for the \$24 million redevelopment of the Fisher Building from offices to apartments.

In addition to that Loop landmark, Lichterman and his wife, Gerry, have done a wide range of projects throughout Chicago, including the redevelopment of two hospitals into residential complexes -- Chicago Osteopathic Medical Center in the Hyde Park neighborhood, now Renaissance Place, and St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Hospital on the Near West Side, now Columbus on the Park.

The Stroger administration's warnings about the worn-out nature of the old hospital's internal systems, Lichterman says, are beside the point. If he were to redevelop the structure, he says, he'd gut it, just as he did at Chicago Osteopathic and Cabrini.

"We just go in there and clear it out," says Lichterman, the president of Kenard Corp. "You're taking everything down but the columns."

But, unlike the redevelopment of those hospitals and the Fisher Building, the question of what to do with County Hospital, which was closed last December, has been awash in controversy.

Citing a 1988 study that found no potential re-use of the building as a hospital, and pointing to an agreement with the city for more open space, Stroger has been adamant that the eight-story structure at

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1835 W. Harrison St. be razed.

Yet, for more than a year, preservationists have argued that the massive, ornately decorated classical building -- a source of medical care and succor for generations of immigrants and the city's poor -- should be saved.

In June, they were joined by rebellious County Board members who contended that redevelopment should be considered, at least, because of the possibility of saving taxpayers millions of dollars in demolition costs.

In all the back and forth, though, no one had had a chance to take a new look at the old building.

Then, during a County Board meeting in July, Lichterman and several developers testified that, in their opinion, County Hospital could be redeveloped much more economically than the county's consultants believed -- and turn a profit.

But to know for sure, they'd have to get inside it.

The result: An agreement by Stroger to permit developers and the news media to tour the hospital and see it for themselves.

"Hey, you're not taking pictures of the cracks in the walls," said Michael LaMont, a top county administrator, chiding newspaper photographers who were on the media tour of County Hospital. (Stroger's aides refused to permit newsgatherers to accompany the developers on either of their two walk-throughs.)

The reporters, photographers and county officials were on the roof of the hospital. Just to the south was the building that replaced County, named for the board president -- the John H. Stroger Jr. Hospital of Cook County. LeMont, the county's director of capital planning and policy, was pointing to a line that snaked about two feet up a row of bricks.

What, he was asked, did the crack mean?

"It means it's got a problem," LeMont said. "The facility is not in good shape. It has not been in good shape for years."

That was the theme of the tour, reiterated often by county officials. Yet, for the most part, to the untrained eyes of reporters, the building seemed no better nor worse than when it was in operation -- only empty. Gurneys were still to be seen here and there in the hallways, along with tall-sided cribs and desks with open drawers. An occasional phone could be found plugged into the wall, and, in an operating theater or two, instruments and supplies were laid out, as if awaiting the next appendectomy.

At the end of the tour, LaMont said the county will notify developers sometime this week with specifications for any redevelopment proposals they want to present. Those plans will be due Oct. 6.

That date is key, he said, because, simultaneously, the county is taking bids on the demolition of the hospital, also due in early October.

Once those documents are in hand, the question of whether to tear down or redevelop the aged, historic structure will have to be answered once and for all.

"The burden is on the developers now," says Lichterman. "Now I have to put together something that I have to sell."

One thing's for certain, he says. Redevelopment costs won't be anywhere near the \$240 per square foot that a county consultant estimated. "I can't see it over \$125 a square foot," Lichterman says.

In the aftermath of the July meeting, 18 developers indicated interest in redeveloping the hospital, but five dropped out before the tours.

One was Ronald Shipka Sr., president of Enterprise Development Co. His firm wasn't bowing out, Shipka said, because he'd learned of any structural problems at the hospital or because some politician had twisted his arm. "It's more of a philosophical change within our company," Shipka said. "I'm disappointed that we could not head the forefront of this."

While Shipka said he was now neutral on preservation of the building, two developers who initially had planned to partner with him had strong opinions on the matter.

David Haymes of Pappageorge/Haymes Ltd. said his firm was dropping out because of its close ties to Enterprise. Nonetheless, he remained a preservation booster. "The building has the opportunity to be converted for sure," he said. "It's a valuable resource. Maybe somebody can find a way to keep it."

By contrast, Gerald Fogelson, co-chairman of the Central Station Development Corp., said, "Our company does not believe the hospital should be saved."

Fogelson, the originator of the Central Station development in the South Loop, where Mayor Daley has lived since 1993, said he changed his mind because "the costs would be prohibitive" and because of the "considerable ambivalence" of the County Board about redevelopment.

Since the tour, most developers have had little or nothing to say about their plans. "We're studying it," said Thomas Weeks, president of LR Development Co.

Lichterman, as he fields questions about his tour, is closed-mouthed, too, about what he might eventually propose for the building.

"I have a few ideas," he says. First, he needs to crunch the numbers and also see what the county's specifications will be for a redevelopment plan.

And, of course, Lichterman, like the other developers still in the hunt, needs to test the "considerable ambivalence" among county officials that Fogelson mentioned.

Rather than waste time and money, Lichterman plans to come up with a general idea of what he wants to propose and then test out the plan's viability. He says he'll shop it around to Ald. Madeline Haithcock (2nd), in whose ward the hospital sits; to the Illinois Medical District, which oversees development in the complex of hospitals on the West Side; to city planning and landmark officials; and to the county board.

As far as Lichterman's concerned, the responses of these public officials and politicians will decide whether he goes forward.

"If they discourage me, I'll fold up my tent," he says. "I'm not going to fight it. If they don't want it, they don't want it."

Lichterman's not sure what to expect.

But he says hopefully, "The fact that they let developers go in and look at it, I assume they'll look at some proposals."

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