



Our view: Don't snub rich history of Rutger Park

AT ISSUE: Rescue Mission should act to preserve dignity of Swancott Home

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The Rescue Mission of Utica hasn't exactly distinguished itself when it comes to supporting historical preservation efforts in its neighborhood.

Its latest plan to auction off Swancott Home and then separately the antiques and furnishings inside is but the latest example of the nonprofit agency's apparent lack of concern for the richness of Rutger Park's history. The Rev. William Dodge, executive director of the agency, should do the right thing and stop the separate auction from going forward.

A little background: The Rescue Mission's expanding presence in Utica's Rutger Street historic district has been fraught with tensions. From its perspective, the mission is supplying much-needed services to the down-and-out of the city. In the neighbors' view, however, the mission has run roughshod over their goals of living a decent life in a historical area. That there are disagreements, then, seems natural.

But the Rescue Mission has made unwise decisions that seem to fly in the face of historical preservation goals. Last year, it attempted to put a substance-abuse treatment center in Swancott Home at 4 Rutger Park. This was occurring just as the local Landmarks Society had succeeded in purchasing 1 and 3 Rutger Park with a goal of turning them into "mansion-museums."

Needless to say, having drug addicts come and go on the Rutger Park parcel would not be conducive to the Landmarks Society's plans.

Fortunately, the city Zoning Board of Appeals last summer rejected the Rescue Mission's plans. That led the mission to announce earlier this month it would sell Swancott Home.

A closer look, however, reveals the intention to auction off the house, then separately auction off the house's contents. While some items inside are modern, others date to its earliest days. Gutting Swancott Home of these items would be detrimental to efforts to preserve its original character.

That Utica ever let the Rutger Street neighborhood fade is testament both to the city's economic struggles in the second half of the 20th century and to residents' and leaders' disregard for the intrinsic value of historic properties. So many Northeastern cities have maintained or boosted their tax bases by keeping 19th-century homes and offices well kept and attractive, drawing higher-income residents and plenty of visitors. Utica, meanwhile, has attacked its history with the wrecking ball - witness the leveling of the once-grand homes of Horatio Seymour, past mayor, New York governor and Democratic presidential candidate, and James Schoolcraft Sherman, vice president of the United States.

A restored and robust Rutger Park can save a precious and priceless core that's left. If the Rescue Mission truly wants to be a good neighbor, it should do its part to preserve Swancott's Home's treasures.

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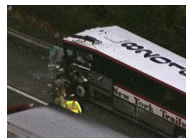
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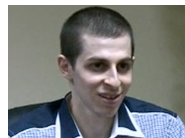
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