

Friendship House Sold In Bankruptcy

By PETER J WALDRON

Friendship House, the grand property of Capitol Hill whose social service mission spanned decades before virtually shutting down in late 2008, has been sold from bankruptcy for \$2.6 million. According to Lisa Benjamin of the brokerage firm Newmark Knight & Frank, Friendship House was sold in an expedited bankruptcy auction to Altus Realty Partners of Virginia in late March of 2010.

Friendship House, a 26,000 square-foot property in the 600 block of South Carolina Ave, SE (the address is 619 D Street, SE), had served since 1904 as a Hull House-like community center serving the needs of the less fortunate, and offering, among other services, a food bank, child care and aid in summer employment for DC youth. Its financial support was severely tested over the last years with its expenditures swelling until finally its creditor, Adams National Bank, moved to foreclosure in mid 2008. Friendship House filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on June 24, 2008.

According to documents on file at the United States Bankruptcy Court, Friendship House had more than 20 accounts of unsecured debt totaling \$375,000 or more. These debts did not include the mortgage held on the property by the Adams National Bank for \$2.7 million..

The mansion, called The Maples, was built by William Lovering in 1795-97 as a Georgian manor house; its first owner was William Mayne Duncanson, whose house guests included George Washington. Francis Scott Key purportedly lived there for a time. Friendship House was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and is a contributing property to the Capitol Hill Historic District.

Nancy Metzger, Chair of the Historic Preservation Committee of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society, the community gatekeeper for Hill historical preservation, says she is glad that the property has been purchased and hopes that long overdue repairs might be initiated.

Metzger expressed concern that the continuing neglect and unabated damage of the last years might be its permanent undoing. "I understand water has gotten in. It has been neglected. The roof needs to be addressed," Metzger lamented. There are also concerns that faulty electrical wiring expose it to the strong possibility of fire. "We want it to be restored and brought back to the community in some way.

Charlie Kehler, a principal of Altus Realty Partners, responded to a query as to Altus' first order of business: "We want to rehabilitate the existing structure. It's historic and needs to be stabilized." Asked what uses Altus saw for the property as far as development, Kehler was circumspect but



Perhaps these padlocked doors will soon reopen. Photo: Andrew Lightman

suggested that with R-4 zoning, "long-term we are still trying to figure out what we have and how it lends itself to renovation." He added that possibilities ranged from "the development of town homes to a private club." Kehler expressed concerns particularly for the 200 year old roof stating that it is "not watertight and that water is penetrating the building." As far as parking as an issue in relation to any future development, Kehler said, "The city has one view. The neighborhood has another. We have to address that."

Under ordinary circumstances R-4 zoning status conveys automatic matters of right to the owner to develop residentially. Theoretically, this property could be developed into 26 residential units, the formula being one unit per 900sf of land parcel. However, Metzger made clear, without in any way pre-judging Altus' plans, that the District's Historic Preservation Board would weigh in heavily on all matters affecting the historic character of the property. The Friendship House is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Dick Wolf, also of CHRIS, a battle-tested veteran of preservation fights whose views often have shaped development projects on the Hill, added, "First of all, I was sorry to see Friendship House go out of business. At one time it played a vital role in the community. Second, I fear for the handling of this historic house." Wolf did add that the property is "landmarked" which means that there are many restrictions on it because it is in the National Registry. "They bought the property with all the contingencies. They [Altus] knew what they had bought. It is one of the most historic buildings in the District."

As for the disposition of Friendship House as a community center, Ron Joiner, Chair of its Board, sadly notes, "It looks like we will not be able to exist beyond the sale of the property." In previous years, Friendship House served over 200 families at any one time.

Sharon Hanley, a 38-year resident of the Hill and next door neighbor of Friendship House, whose three children grew up playing on its grounds, offered these thoughts: "I feel sad about what happened. They did a lot of good things for the community. It's what has happened all over the country" adding, in reference to the impending changes: "I think it is not going to be fun living on this block while they do it." ★

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