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St. Edward Seminary could have future as park-style lodge

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1/14 Photos: The crumbling Saint Edward Seminary building in Kenmore, just west of Juanita Drive could be remade into a national-park-style lodge under a proposal by developer Kevin Daniels. (Mike Siegel/The Seattle Times)

By Lynn Thompson
Seattle Times staff reporter

A developer has proposed rebuilding the crumbling Kenmore seminary into a national park-style lodge, spa and conference center.

For more than 40 years, Catholic school boys used to line the long hallway outside the Saint Edward Seminary dining hall, the western light falling through graceful, arched windows that stand unchanged today.

But upstairs, in the former dormitory rooms, decades of water damage and neglect have left crumbling walls, rusted pipes and a huge maintenance bill for Washington State Parks, which in 1977 bought the 316-acre grounds and school buildings that include a gymnasium and shuttered pool.

Now a private developer who specializes in historic renovation has proposed restoring the four-story, Romanesque Revival seminary building in Kenmore and turning it into a hotel with meeting rooms, fitness center and spa in the style of grand national-park lodges.

The proposal from Kevin Daniels, whose firm has restored a number of historic Seattle buildings including King Street Station, Union Station and the Starbucks Center, may be the last, best hope to preserve the huge, 90,000-square-foot, brick-and-concrete building. A year ago, the State Parks and Recreation Commission directed staff to either find a partner to finance the rehabilitation by this September, or vacate the 1931 building, where deferred maintenance is estimated to be at least \$14 million.

“I personally want to see that old building restored. I don’t want it to fall down,” said Kenmore Mayor David Baker, who has seen a number of restoration plans over the past decade shot down for lack of money or lack of public support for a commercial venture in the middle of a peaceful park.

Under the proposal by Daniels Real Estate, all but about eight acres of the grounds immediately surrounding the seminary building would remain a state park. In exchange for the building, Daniels would buy almost 10 acres of adjacent, undeveloped Lake Washington waterfront and deed it to the park.



Source: ESRI, TeleAtlas
MARK NOWLIN /
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The estimated cost of the improvements, including additional parking for visitors, will exceed \$50 million, said Daniels, president of the development firm.

Parks staff is asking the commission for a one-year extension of the September deadline so Daniels can continue to draw up plans to redevelop the seminary building and find a business willing to operate the lodge. The commission will consider that request at its Sept. 10 meeting in Spokane.

While his proposal invokes the stately lodges of Mount Rainier and Yellowstone, Daniels says Saint Edward wouldn’t feature a massive river stone fireplace or elk-antler chandeliers. Because the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, he said, significant features, such as carved mahogany doors and stone archways, must be preserved.

Still, he said, “Some of the rooms and hallways are just stunning. Our goal would be to take visitors back in time, to create a true oasis in the middle of an urban setting.”

Daniels also has a personal interest in the project. He and his wife were married at Bastyr University Chapel, formerly part of the seminary, and hosted their rehearsal dinner on the Saint Edward’s grounds 31 years ago.

Opposition to the plan has already emerged. Ann Hurst, who successfully nominated the seminary building and grounds to the national historic register in 2007, opposes turning the building into an active hotel with thousands of visitors a year.

She said the seminary and grounds were purchased for \$7 million in 1977 from the Archdiocese of Seattle for use as a park. Half of the money came from federal Land and Water Conservation Funds, which have restrictions about converting parklands to other uses.

“It was never the intention to parcel out the land and put a commercial building right in the middle,” said Hurst, who lives adjacent to the park and is an active member of Citizens for Saint Edward Park.

The group successfully fought a proposal by McMenamins in 2005 to convert the seminary building into a hotel and brew pub. They also helped scuttle a 2014 plan by a cybersecurity firm to renovate the building and locate its offices there.

The city of Kenmore had hoped that Bastyr University, located on 51 acres of former seminary land adjacent to the park, would renovate the historic building and use it for classrooms and dorms.

Bastyr partnered with Daniels last year to explore a proposal but backed out in February after concluding it wasn’t financially feasible for the small, natural-medicine college to take on.

State parks officials say it would cost an estimated \$14 million to \$16 million just to stabilize the building and bring it up to current seismic and safety codes. The ground-floor dining hall is rented out for weddings and other events, but because it has only one doorway, fire codes limit the number of guests to 50. The rest of the building is off-limits to visitors.

Four rangers live there, but with an annual heating and maintenance bill of \$100,000, “It’s the most expensive ranger housing in the state,” said Michael Hankinson, parks planner who is overseeing the Saint Edward restoration proposal.

He said he sympathizes with neighbors who want to see the park open only to passive recreation. But he said the state parks’ mission is to connect the public not only with natural resources, but with historical and cultural ones as well.

“For 90 years, the public has only seen the building from the outside. If done right, the renovation will enhance the public’s use,” Hankinson said.

At Saint Edward State Park last week, assistant ranger Samantha Christine fielded calls from the public worried about the fate of the park while also showing visitors the grounds and the steep, half-mile trail from the seminary to Lake Washington and 3,000 feet of public shoreline.

Last year, according to park statistics, about 635,000 people visited Saint Edward, some for the city of Kenmore's outdoor summer concerts, many to picnic and enjoy the children's playground, trails and beach.



“People are concerned about how a new development will change their experience of the park,” Christine said. But she added, “I haven’t met anyone who hasn’t wanted the building preserved for something. No one wants to see it crumble.”

Assistant Park Ranger Samantha Christine, right, walks the hallways at Saint Edward Seminary, built in the 1930s. The old dorm room at left shows how years of neglect and water damage have affected the building's interior. (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times)



Assistant Park Ranger Samantha Christine walks a hallway at Saint Edward Seminary. A developer has proposed remaking the old seminary into a hotel in the style of grand national-park lodges. Opponents say the park and can't be converted for such a use. (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times)



Spes messis in semine, seen over a seminary doorway, translates to “the harvest in the seed.” Since the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, any restoration must preserve significant features like stone archways. (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times)



Student desks and chairs from the 1930s are stacked in the basement of the old St. Edwards Seminary. (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times)