

New life for old hospital

Former Scottish Rite building in Decatur to be renovated under mixed-use project

By Bill Torpy

STAFF WRITER

The tiny crutches in the basement and the operating table in a darkened room upstairs are the only reminders of the patients who once hobbled the hallways of the Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children in south Decatur.

"That's a scary-looking table," said Robert Soens, president of the Community Center of South Decatur, as he toured the crumbling facility. Years ago, children stricken with polio were placed on that table to have casts and braces fitted on them. But those instruments of healing were left behind in 1976, when Scottish Rite moved to a sprawling modern facility in north Fulton County.

During the two decades since, the rambling, historic facility has crumbled as rain seeped through the roof and the erstwhile hospital awaited a new mission.

Today, that new mission is becoming reality. Decatur officials voted last month to transfer the 6.5-acre property over to a developer for a mixed-use construction project, part of which harkens back to the hospital's original purpose.

That plan includes building 14 housing units for disabled adults, renovating the 26,000-square-foot building into office space and a community center, and building 14 single-family homes. Developers are negotiating with five potential tenants to rent space in the building. Once contracts are signed, Progressive Redevelopment Inc. will obtain the building loans and receive title to the property. Lorri Mills, a PRI executive who is overseeing the project, said she is negotiating with firms in the medical and nonprofit fields, "and they want to be in this building."

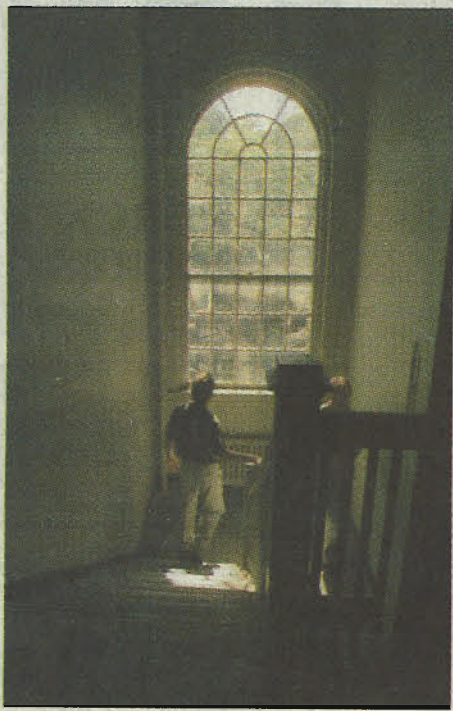
"This is a good fit for the historic use of the property," Decatur's assistant city manager, Hugh Saxon, said of the housing units for the disabled. Those one- and two-bedroom units would be built behind the old hospital in conjunction with the Shepherd Center and with a \$1.1 million Housing and Urban Development grant.

The entire project would cost between \$4 million and



Photos by RENÉE HANNANS / Staff

Rehabilitation in the works: Plans are in progress to remodel the old Scottish Rite Hospital building (above). Below, Robert Soens, president of the Community Center of South Decatur, takes a tour through the building, where a stack of crutches (right) still stands in the basement.



Hospital: Designed by Reid

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\$5 million, said Mills.

"This building is really a gem," said Mills, as she stepped around debris and pointed to the arched ceilings on one of the pavilions. "They didn't know what to do with kids then, so they gave them light, fresh air and sunshine."

The building, designed by famed Atlanta architect J. Neel Reid, was opened in 1919 and became a model for Shriner hospitals nationwide.

"They had a big playground back there, and I can still see those children out there playing," said Muriel Johnson, 81, whose home sits surrounded by the old Scottish Rite property. Her family has owned the home since 1920. "They had swings that they pumped with their hands, and those kids could run on their crutches as fast as I could."

A 1952 DeKalb New Era article said: "The hospital has two wards with a total of 60 beds.

We saw children from four weeks to 14 years of age. Some wore braces, some were encased in hot, heavy plaster casts, and some showed scars of terrible burns.

"All, however, appeared cheerful and contented. You will notice the children are able to get around, to help entertain the ones in bed. In the mornings, if the weather is good, the beds are rolled out on the asphalt in the yard."

In the late 1970s, the building was used as a community center. An early 1990s community campaign to raise \$1.5 million to renovate the building never took off.

"It was a daunting task, and in some ways, a little unrealistic," said Soens. "There has to be a strong economic tie in there somewhere. The single-family homes are the no-brainer part of the deal. It helps minimize the risk to the developer."

In recent years, the neighborhood has seen massive renovations in the residential areas, as well as the nearby business districts. Homes are being snapped up by people looking to live "intown." Four homes are slated to be built on the 5-acre hospital property, and 10 will be constructed on a 1.5-acre parcel across West Benson Street. They will retain a historic Craftsman design.