

# Taking a ‘massive risk’ downtown

## City awaits proposal from Children's Village on ground-floor space

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Plans to redevelop a building in the heart of downtown Peekskill – an empty eyesore for 10-plus years – are moving forward, with the focus now on how to use the ground floor and basement space.

Children’s Village, the Dobbs Ferry-based provider of services to children and young adults in the foster care and the juvenile system, wants to buy the former Workers Comp building at 41 North Division St. and create 22 apartments on the upper floors, 10 of them set aside for young adults leaving foster care or supervised living, and 10,000 square feet of commercial space. State and county funding would mean the other 12 affordable units would be open to all county residents in a lottery.

Children’s Village’s goal in a Peekskill facility is to provide transitional housing for employed young adults leaving the social services system and entering the world of independence.



Courtesy of Joseph G. Thompson, Architect

Conceptual rendering of what a new structure at 41 North Division Street might look like.

The Children’s Village project has won approvals from the Planning Commission and Historic and Landmarks Preservation board but still needs to meet certain conditions before receiving a building permit. Several Common Council members toured one of the group’s buildings in Manhattan last year and expressed admiration for the site. [The Common Council will not have a vote on the project.]

Making the Workers’ Comp building project economically viable is an open question and filling the street-level space with commercial tenants will be critical.

“We face challenging economics with just 22 apartments,” Jeremy Kohomban, Children’s Village President and CEO, explained at a Planning Commission meeting on Aug. 13. “It will have a huge impact on our bottom line if don’t fill [the] ground floor, but that’s a commitment on our part. We believe well-designed Class A space is still marketable, given the location and the design elements of our plan.

“I know we are taking a massive risk -- my board has asked me the same question. You can run the numbers, we’re not making any money on this, but we think, if we can prove this concept here, Peekskill will get something beautiful and we get something that we might be able to replicate elsewhere.”

**GROUND AND LOWER-LEVEL USES**

**Ground Floor**

- City and Emporium Welcome Area
- Peekskill Made Products – Sales Area
- African American History Museum Precursor
- Event / Program / Workshop Area

**Basement – Maker Space**

- Retail / Maker Business Support Programming
- Selected fabrication, work stations
- 3-D printing / plotting / AR work stations
- Video production green screen space
- Artist work studio spaces

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### Developing the ground floor space

Discussion of proposals for the ground floor space took place at the Common Council meeting on Jan. 21. City Economic Development Director Matthew Rudikoff made a presentation to the Council and asked for guidance on how to proceed.

Rudikoff said several ideas were sent to Children’s Village to consider including a business incubator, a Peekskill welcome center, a children’s museum, a health and wellness facility and an African-American museum. Children’s Village expressed interest in three of the ideas — the incubator, the welcome center and the African-American museum, according to Rudikoff.

In response, several Council members expressed their concerns about how much time city officials are working on the project and their expectation that Children’s Village would take the lead and come forward with the proposals.

“I would just say we need to know what our part in this is and how much that we are going to have to put into this in terms of our resources,” said Peekskill Mayor Vivian McKenzie. “When we met with Children’s Village, it was all about what they were going to do for us. I don’t want it being another project where we are using our resources to come up with something that another person promised to us.”

Councilman Brian Fassett said a feasibility study would be needed on a welcoming center to determine how the city would be involved and to analyze the return engagement of the space. “We need to get people into the downtown using the space and then going to restaurants, retail and other establishments in our city.”

Peekskill City Manager Matt Alexander told the Peekskill Herald that Children’s Village needs to offer their proposal for the ground floor to the Council.



The former Workers Comp building at 41 North Division Street where Children’s Village would locate. Courtesy of Joseph G. Thompson, Architect.

“The City is working with the applicant, who received a competitive award from the State, and the applicant will take on the planning and implementation of the project,” Alexander said.

“However, as always with any development, there will be a role for Planning and Economic Development staff to see that City objectives are met. At this beginning stage it is more fluid, but the Mayor is asking staff to let the applicant take the lead.”

Christopher Rucas, a spokesperson for Children’s Village, said the agency is making progress on coming up with proposals on the ground floor.

“Children’s Village will continue to work with the city and anyone else that can help us achieve our goals. We’re excited about the vibrant commercial space,” Rucas said.

In New York City, Children’s Village built the 10-story Harlem Dowling, a building with 60 affordable apartments for residents of Harlem, including 12 studios of transitional housing for young adults aging out of foster care.

They also recently opened the 14-story “Eliza” building in the Inwood neighborhood in Manhattan, with 175 “deeply affordable” apartments, a new public library branch and various community services.

Whether or not the city of Peekskill would consider a public/private partnership — involving a commitment from the city to pay a form of rent to operate a welcome center, museum or business incubator — is uncertain.

Children’s Village still has to buy the property. The empty building has been listed for sale for several years at an asking price of \$2.2 million.