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It won't be cheap, but the former home of the Maritime Museum of B.C. could be edging toward a renovation that would once again make it a bustling place.

The building, shuttered and empty, began its life as B.C.'s courthouse in 1889 and also housed the land-registry office and the provincial police. The historic courtroom where Judge Matthew Baillie Begbie held sway has had previous preservation work.

While the ravages of time are apparent in many areas, the provincial government is intent on getting the site back into usable shape. It helps that the basic form of the provincially owned Bastion Square edifice is relatively intact.

The positive points of the building's condition do not mean a basic fix won't be costly — at least \$12 million would likely be needed just to make it safe to occupy, according to an engineering assessment. Of note is that the building sits on rock, which would help when doing seismic work.

Money spent on refurbishment would help only to make the building habitable.

“But that does not include what we will want to do after that,” said Sunny Dhaliwal, assistant deputy minister in the Ministry of Citizens' Services' real-property division. “For example, \$12 million will make the building safe, but after, if somebody wants to make it into a boutique hotel or an arts centre or an office space, then those costs will be extra.”

A budding plan to turn the 30,000-square-foot heritage site into an arts hub has generated interest from city officials, and has also been buoyed by people from the Downtown Victoria Business Association and the Bastion Square Revitalization Association.

The idea is still in its beginning stages, and the province is taking a wait-and-see approach. The arts hub is the only active proposal.

As for the Maritime Museum, officials are planning to issue a statement about its future next week. It is now housed in much smaller quarters at 634 Humboldt St.

The Bastion Square building has weathered the years well, said Graeme Sykes, real-estate manager in Dhaliwal's division.

“It is impressive how well the building has performed over 130 years,” he said. “Our engineers are telling us that the core structure, the bones of the building, are still good enough to last and last for years to come.” Along with that, vistas of the harbour seen from the building are heritage-protected, he said.

“Down there at water level, the city says that nothing's going to get built to obscure that view.”

Citizens' Services Minister Jinny Sims said she is excited by the prospect of an arts centre in the building, “but they need to do a study to see if it's worth their while.”

She said the province wants to see the site maintained and ultimately establish partnerships with users.

“But before anybody can occupy it, it has to meet the base building standards.”

Sims said the building has a lot of importance.

“It’s a very special building and it belongs to this community in Victoria and the people of British Columbia.”

With that in mind, the province wants to find “an appropriate, innovative and long-term use,” Sims said.

“So we’re looking at all of the viable options that are out there.”

She said the province spends money on the building even when it’s not being used.

“It’s costing us around \$178,000 a year to maintain, to heat it and to do some repairs on an ongoing basis.”

Property taxes and security are also included in that total.

Costs have been much higher over the past year, with \$400,000 spent on building upkeep to deal with interior damage, Dhaliwal said.

Sims said the last time she visited the site she thought that perhaps it could house a few restaurants, although that would require a considerable investment.

Part of the issue for prospective tenants is that nobody really knows how much it will cost to do what is needed to make the building work for them, Dhaliwal said. He said the province is not behind any particular idea for the building.

“Our interest is certainly in making sure that it’s preserved and we are able to put this building to some good use,” he said. “There’s no time frame.

“Our aim is to determine the best use for the building.”

When the museum moved out in late 2014 due to concerns about the building’s condition, the province did some analysis so that any further deterioration could be stopped, Dhaliwal said.

One preventive measure has been to make 38 holes in the ceilings to check the condition of joists and beams, and how they were assembled.

“That work is done and as a result, we now have structural drawings,” Sykes said.

Still, Sykes said, the building continues to show the effects of the elements.

“There are sections where water has infiltrated into the wall space. It’s a wood-frame building with masonry on the outside, and then what happens is the plaster gets moisture on it.

“Usually there’s going to be mould present within the plaster, so they strip away sections to expose the brick and tear out the water damage.”

Some of the water issues came from turrets on the roof having insufficient flashing, Sykes said.

Current concerns are that the building has no sprinklers, and the large elevator shaft has no preventive features to stop a fire spreading from floor to floor.

The ornate 1899 elevator is still in place and has always been a favourite with the public.

“It’s probably the No. 1 heritage-designated feature in the whole building,” Sykes said.

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