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## Pros, cons to selling Dallas City Hall voiced at public meeting

Dallas Business Journal

By [Noor Adatia](#) – Staff Writer, Dallas Business Journal

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*Finance Committee Chair and Council Member Chad West led the discussion about the state of Dallas City Hall and what the city should do about the historic building. NOOR ADATIA/DBJ*

City leaders are wrestling with what to do with Dallas City Hall, with some expressing an interest in selling the aging building and moving into leased office space downtown.

The future of the 47-year-old architectural landmark entered the public forum on Oct. 21 as Dallas City Council's new finance committee took up the issue. The committee [has been tasked with assessing the city's immense real estate portfolio, starting with City Hall](#).

Designed by renowned architect I.M. Pei., the building holds cultural significance for Dallas. It was built in the late 1970s, as the city was attempting to re-craft its brand after the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The conversation about what to do with 1500 Marilla St. is expected to be an emotional one and sentiments certainly ran high during this week's meeting about the deteriorating city facility that's been in the spotlight for its leaky parking garage and plumbing failures. The cost to fully repair the seven-story building is estimated by the city to range between \$152 million to \$345 million.

Soaring repair costs coupled with aging restroom facilities and a faulty HVAC system have caused developers and city officials alike to wonder if it's worth maintaining the building, or if the city should consider selling it and moving elsewhere.

"The can has been kicked down the road for more than 40 years, when some of the earliest leaks were discovered, and it's time we treat this building and treat our taxpayer resources with the respect they deserve," said Councilman Chad West, who is chair of the finance committee.

If the city does decide to sell the 1 million-square-foot building, the site could attract a big-name developer for a once-in-a-generation real estate opportunity.

Downtown Dallas is at a crossroads: the central business district has seen a litany of departures and more major corporate tenants are also considering their future there. Yet the area is poised to see billions of dollars in new development soon, including with the [redevelopment of the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center](#). Meanwhile, the Dallas Mavericks are [searching for a new arena site](#) in the city.

All of that in concert presents a unique opportunity to revitalize one of downtown's less glamorous corners.

After a presentation from Director of Facilities and Real Estate Management John Johnson and Assistant City Manager Donzell Gibson about the state of the facility on Oct. 21, council members began firing off questions, kicking off a nearly two-hour discussion on next steps for the very meeting facility they were gathered in. Nearly all council members agreed that doing nothing about City Hall or continuing to address repairs as needed were not viable options.

## Reasons to lease space

Council Member Gay Donnell Willis said that leasing space downtown could be a step in the right direction in restoring vibrancy to the district, which many hope to become more dense and pedestrian-friendly. Some options floated in the presentation were Harwood Center, Ross Tower, Renaissance Tower, Comerica Tower and Bank of America Plaza, Dallas' tallest skyscraper.

"It could allow someone to activate this location, while we also invest in downtown and revitalize another part of our city that may need it," Willis said.



*Council Members Gay Donnell Willis and Zarin Gracey speak during the Oct. 21 finance committee meeting.  
NOOR ADATIA/DBJ*

Gibson clarified that none of the facility owners in the presentation have reached out to the city about leasing space and it's likely a surprise to them they're included at all in this conversation.

"The market is very favorable right now for us to take a big block of downtown office space," Assistant City Manager Robin Bentley said.

Eric Fleiss, CEO of Regent Properties, was called to the podium to provide his expertise on general market conditions and verify Bentley's statement. Regent Properties owns Trammell Crow Center on Ross Avenue, a 50-story tower that's currently 90% leased.

"I don't think it's a surprise to anyone in this room that downtown office buildings are suffering," Fleiss said. "That means that the opportunity is there to get quality space at a significant discount."

Jennifer Scripps, CEO of Downtown Dallas Inc., said in a statement that the group supports a "full analysis of all options" for the future of Dallas City Hall, "especially as it relates to citywide economic benefits and the vitality of Downtown."

Scripps added that a review should be conducted urgently, and DDI will provide any necessary support.

## **Other considerations**

Councilwoman Kathy Stewart, the subcommittee vice chair, said that if City Hall moves, it would be important to have an outdoor gathering place — harkening to the 4.7-acre plaza underneath the existing concrete building. She also said the council should consider parking and accessibility to DART stations for a new location.

A handful of committee members voiced their opposition to moving, including Councilman Paul Ridley, a preservation advocate who said he wants to see more thorough cost estimates before the group decides to discard the facility.

"If we were to move into some anonymous office building, we would have a real burden in demonstrating to people that this is the center of the people's representatives of the city of Dallas," Ridley said.

Councilwoman Cara Mendelsohn noted city hall's issues are reflective of a larger "budgeting failure" and accused city staffers of steering leaders to abandon the building and consider other options.

The end of the discussion resulted in the committee asking city staff to prepare a timeline and cost for a facilities condition assessment of City Hall, as well as to compile a cost breakdown of what looking into a new facility would entail, including the average rent price. The next finance committee meeting on City Hall is expected to take place Nov. 4 at 1 p.m.

"We've got to make a decision either way," West said, adding it should be made relatively soon to avoid draining more city resources. He hopes committee members can also go into further detail about the economic impact of their decision.

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