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ERIE COUNTY COMPTROLLER

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COMPTROLLER MYCHAJLIW PROPOSES SALE OF RATH BUILDING ONCE REMOTE WORKFORCE IN PLACE

A permanent remote workforce allows the county to right-size building space in order to sell the Rath Building, generating revenue by putting it back on the property tax rolls

(ERIE COUNTY, NY) – Erie County Comptroller Stefan I. Mychajliw, Jr. is calling on partners within Erie County government to begin the process of selling the Rath Building, putting the property back on the tax rolls, and either sharing workspace with another municipality or leasing smaller space. But in order to begin the process of selling the Rath Building to the private sector, Erie County government must first establish a permanent remote workforce policy where many employees are no longer needed to physically be located at 95 Franklin Street in downtown Buffalo.

Comptroller Mychajliw even suggests negotiations with the City of Buffalo to share City Hall space with both governments. This regional approach of having city and county government under one roof would save money and better serve taxpayers.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Comptroller Mychajliw sent a Request for Solutions (RFS) to developers and met with many of them to gather ideas on how they could repurpose the Rath Building. With a permanent, remote workforce, now would be the prime opportunity to sell a government building where space is not needed.

With 16 floors, a basement, sub-basement and an underground, 90-space parking garage, the Rath Building is ideally situated near Old County Hall, which houses State Supreme Court, County Court chambers and the Office of Erie County Clerk. Also within walking distance is the Family Court building, Buffalo City Court, and U.S. District Court (Federal). It would be the ideal location for a mixed use of law firms and residential.

“Out of crisis, comes opportunity. We need to think big and act boldly. The first step is a permanent, remote workforce for employees that don’t need to be in the Rath Building. County employees are doing a phenomenal job working remotely. This will make it easier for parents to balance family responsibilities and get their county work done. A lot of employees also care for elderly parents. A remote workplace will increase productivity. This is what our employees want.”

The Rath Building was constructed in 1968, at the cost of \$15,662,339. It has 16 floors, a basement and sub-basement, as well as a 90-spot parking area underneath it.

The building is 30 feet and a one-minute walk to Old County Hall, where the District Attorney's Office, as well as several State Supreme Court and Erie County court chambers, are housed. The Rath building is 410 feet, or a two-minute walk, from the Erie County Family Court building; .2 miles, or a five-minute walk to the Buffalo City Court building; and .3 miles, or a 6-minute walk, to the U.S. District Court for the Western District of New York at 2 Niagara Square.

Because of its prime location, it would be well suited for law offices. The Rath Building's close proximity to many Buffalo amenities and attractions would also make it suitable for mixed use, allowing for residential spaces, as well. This could be done similar to the purchase and redevelopment of another downtown government building.

In 2007, the Thaddeus J. Dulski Federal Building on Delaware Avenue in Buffalo was sold for \$6.1 million to the Uniland Corporation in an online auction. The Federal building previously was home to some 50 federal agencies. It became the "Avant Building" in downtown Buffalo after a renovation cost of \$83 million of private investment. The Avant Building is 15 floors and put 440,000 square feet back on the tax rolls.

"The Rath building is a great location for office space or mixed use. The time is right. The time is now. Let's work together, have a remote workforce and generate revenue by selling the Rath Building," said Comptroller Mychajliw.

The Erie County Comptroller's office was already well prepared to work remotely when COVID-19 hit, working with the Division of Information and Support Services (DISS) to implement a plan that would allow staff to work off-site using the desktop feature.

Comptroller's Office Staff had been trained on various programs that would allow them to properly share files safely and securely while working remotely. Years of planning was put in place to create a remote workforce for the Office of Erie County Comptroller in case a weather-related incident prevented access to the Rath Building. A full plan was in place to operate the entire office remotely, prior to COVID-19.

The Comptroller provided a specific plan to the county and unions after hearing from several employees concerned about their health and safety. Many prefer to work remotely. Most stated they are more productive, get more work done and are happy that a remote workforce alleviates family related pressures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Many of our hard-working employees have kids that will start school from home. A lot of private employers, as well as the City of Buffalo, already allow remote work where possible. Once we establish a work from home policy, we must take the next step. The next and most important step is right-sizing the space we need. Some would argue we didn't even need the space within the Rath Building prior to the Coronavirus pandemic," said Comptroller Mychajliw.

A permanent remote workforce plan also gives greater flexibility to employees whose job duties require them to work in a county building. For example, four 10-hour days should be considered in order to reduce the number of employees in the building on any given day, ensuring greater distancing.

"Look at how successful the Avant is in downtown Buffalo. The federal government got out of the landlord business. They turned an old government building into tax revenue generator. If the federal government can put a building that's not needed back into the hands of the private sector, Erie County government can do the same," concluded Comptroller Mychajliw.

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