

Larry Beahan: State must not allow Adam Hospital to deteriorate

By Larry Beahan

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Western New York is the home of a monument to a medical miracle, the J. N. Adam Memorial Hospital in Perrysburg. This complex of red brick and white-pillared buildings with its stained-glass dome and expansive porches stands on a 1,500-foot hillside overlooking Lake Erie.

Designed by world-famous architect John Hopper Coxhead, it is surrounded by 650 acres of the most diverse forest in New York. This natural, architectural and historic gem marks two advances in the control and near eradication of the disease known in the last century as the White Plague, tuberculosis.

In 1910, the mayor of Buffalo, James Noble Adam, donated the land and the City of Buffalo built this state-of-the-art facility. It used the treatment system developed by Dr. Alexander Spengler, who noted the curative effect on tuberculosis of living in the alpine climate of Davos, Switzerland. His patients and those in Perrysburg were treated with rest, fresh air, sunshine and good food with excellent results.

In 1947, the antibiotic streptomycin was found effective against the “tubercle bacillus” and gradually the long hospitalizations of the Davos cure became unnecessary. This second major victory against the dread disease was marked by the closing of J. N. Adam Hospital for the treatment of tuberculosis.

In 1960, the hospital became a residential center for the rehabilitation and education of the mentally handicapped. By 1995, mentally handicapped people were found to be better treated in the community and J. N. Adam Hospital was abandoned.

As a boy I lived for a time in my grandparents’ house in Buffalo. Uncle Frank lived there and died of TB. When Aunt Eleanor came down with it, the doctor said, “By the time the leaves fall, she’ll be gone.” Eleanor went to Perrysburg and lived 10 years. My mother spent a month in Perrysburg, then recovered at home. When my wife, Lyn, came down with it, streptomycin allowed her complete recovery.

Thousands of Western New Yorkers have had relatives treated in the hospital, were treated there themselves or have worked there. The hospital was an economic engine for Cattaraugus County as well as a place of respite and cure for thousands. It remains a historic monument to the alleviation of human suffering and deserves to be preserved as a reminder of that successful effort. Instead, New York State left it unprotected, abandoned to the elements. Now the roof is leaking.

Friends of J. N. Adam (FJNA) has organized to promote the reuse and preservation of the hospital and its forest. Buyers have considered it for conversion to a hotel, an artists' colony, senior housing and condominiums. FJNA has been to court to prevent New York State from selling it to interests that might have leveled it. Write to Gov. David A. Paterson to protect J. N. Adam Memorial Hospital and end this policy of "demolition by neglect."

Larry Beahan is conservation chairman of the Sierra Club Niagara Group.