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Saving The Aetna House

Preservationists are on the verge of saving an elegant 1890-era red brick house in Hartford's Asylum Hill neighborhood.

Aetna Inc. had planned to raze the former residence at 47 Sigourney St. to make way for more surface parking, but delayed demolition for three months after civic and political leaders objected. Aetna offered to donate the house if preservationists could move it. Now the company is extending the deadline, a sign of good faith.

The preservation effort is being coordinated by the recently formed Northside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance, which includes Aetna. NINA hopes to gain title to a nearby vacant lot surrounded by compatible old houses. NINA would then move Aetna's Queen Anne house to the new site.

Transporting the large two-story dwelling, however, could cost more than \$100,000. NINA also would need to build a foundation on the

site and make whatever alterations would be required in the house's interior. Aetna has said it would donate about \$40,000 toward the move. That still leaves a big gap. The project might qualify for state historic tax credits and other assistance, which would help offset the costs.

NINA Executive Director Kenneth Johnson is "cautiously optimistic" that he can seal the agreement.

Saving the structure has symbolic as well as practical value. It would break an unfortunate pattern of ripping down historic buildings to clear the way for parking lots. But it also would help stabilize a city neighborhood by adding a distinctive house that would be placed on the market and sold as a single-family home.

The best solution still is to leave the house at its present location and put it to good use. Barring that, the next best option is to find another suitable site.