

# Farhi offers courthouse to St. Thomas

He believes the donation would prompt the province to consolidate all St. Thomas courts in the heritage building.

BY CHIP MARTIN  
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London real estate whiz Shmuel Farhi has a new plan and new hope he can save the Elgin County courthouse in St. Thomas.

Farhi has offered to give the 154-year-old Wellington Street landmark to the City of St. Thomas in hopes that will persuade the Ontario government to rehabilitate it and consolidate all its courts there.

He said yesterday it's clear the province isn't keen to deal with him, so he's made the offer to St. Thomas Mayor Cliff Barwick.

"It's not about Shmuel Farhi," the developer said. "I am happy to donate the structure to the city. Now let's see where the (provincial) government's heart is."

Farhi said he's prepared to maintain and manage the building, which

he bought in 1989 and which sees limited use by higher-level courts. And he's hired architects to demonstrate how it could be modified and expanded to handle all modern court needs in the city. The province has said it wants to consolidate all courts in one building and is still working on a needs study that was to have been released in late 2006.

Farhi, one of London's largest land-

lords, has warned if the province opts to build a new courts administration building, his architectural gem, suited strictly for court use, is at risk. He said he's willing to have the historic building upgraded and expanded in exchange for a long-term lease.

Farhi noted the province announced last month it would pour unspecified millions into restoring the exterior of the former London Normal School in south London, a 109-year-old landmark owned by the province.

In a letter to Steve Peters, MPP for Elgin-Middlesex-London, Farhi last month said: "I find it ironic that the same government has been unable to make the slightest commitment to the Elgin County courthouse, even though it has housed the courts for more than 150 years."

In a letter to Barwick at the same time, Farhi noted "millions of dollars" will flow to the normal school, demonstrating the government's "commitment to this heritage building."

Farhi wrote he was becoming "increasingly disillusioned" by the province's unwillingness to work with private landlords in heritage preservation.

So, he said, he's willing to "donate (the courthouse) to the city of St. Thomas in order to facilitate the provincial government's ability to make the necessary investment to preserve and upgrade this important heritage courthouse."

Barwick was unavailable for comment yesterday, but city clerk Wendell Graves said the city has been waiting for the province to complete its needs study before deciding what to do.

Peters was also unavailable.

But Farhi said the initial response he's heard from the city makes him optimistic.

"I think the City of St. Thomas will work with us," he said. "I think common sense will prevail and the provincial government will work with the city."

He said the most important thing is to save the courthouse.

"If I have to donate it to the municipality, so be it," he said.



**FARHI:** Hopes "common sense" prevails.