

## Auction looms for building

### Value plummets for Underwriters Exchange

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Mary Repka, an accountant, sat in her office Thursday surrounded by 4-foot stacks of papers and Green Bay Packers memorabilia while playing solitaire on her computer.

The one-player game is a perfect metaphor for Repka's office, a tiny room tucked back in the northeast corner of the Underwriters Exchange Building at 828 N. Broadway in downtown Milwaukee. To find Repka, one must walk through the front entrance, climb a few steps and pass a series of locked doors before reaching the eighth door on the left.

"I apologize for the mess," Repka said, gazing around the room. "I have been in the process of cleaning, but the different piles have now been sorted into like things."

The clutter, though, is of little consequence to Repka because visitors rarely find her office. The nine-story structure, completed in 1923 and sandwiched between Old Saint Mary

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PHOTO BY KEVIN HARNACK

## Tenants see potential for the right price

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Parish and a parking structure, virtually is empty and facing an auction sale in coming weeks. An open house is scheduled Thursday.

The building once was listed for sale at \$1.65 million by Wangard Cos., Milwaukee. Now, Chicago-based auctioneer Rick Levin & Associates Inc. has set a \$600,000 minimum bid — a figure that could be overestimating the building's value.

"It's an income property that throws off no income," said Jack Quinlevan, president of Quinlevan Commercial Real Estate Inc. and a tenant in the building. "So who really wants it? There's nobody here paying rent, so it's kind of a crazy deal."

"It'll take some guy with the courage and foresight to come in here and envision this place to be 85 percent to 90 percent leased ... and put \$2 million into it to get it there."

Real estate listings show the 56,500-square-foot Underwriters Exchange Building operated at 37 percent occupancy in 2010, but Quinlevan, who does commercial real estate work throughout Milwaukee, said he thinks it's much lower than that now. And the Class B office space classification, he said, is wishful thinking because of the building's tiny suites and porous single-pane windows.

"At a minimum," he said, "(a new owner) should replace the windows, and then you probably want to dress up the lobby. I think you'd probably want to dress up the common areas to encourage new leasing. It's tough. You're buying something that's got big liabilities."

Among those liabilities is an annual property tax bill of more than \$50,000, according to city records.

The building changed hands several times during the past decade, eventually falling into the lap of Associated Bank after a foreclosure. Wangard unsuccessfully tried to sell the building since 2010 and continues to manage the property, but president and CEO Stewart Wangard said he had no information on the building's future.

"Our role is limited to managing it on behalf of the bank," he said.

Rick Levin, the auctioneer, did not

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**Jack Quinlevan**

president of Quinlevan Commercial Real Estate Inc.

and a tenant in the Underwriters Exchange Building

return phone calls seeking comment Thursday.

Quinlevan, who saw auction signs posted upon returning from a recent lunch, said it's likely the sale could displace the few remaining tenants.

"I don't know what the proposed use will be," he said.

But Erik Madisen, principal of Madisen Architects, another building tenant, said he planned to move out in a few weeks no matter what happened. His three-person firm is moving to the Menomonee Valley, across from the Harley-Davidson Museum.

"This building is such a question mark," he said. "We've been here eight years, and this office is just an office. It's not an architect's office."

The building has great potential, Madisen said, but he agreed with Quinlevan that rehabilitating it would take more than \$1 million.

"Architecturally, it's a nice building," Madisen said. "With the right person purchasing it and willing to put some cash into it, I think it's going to be nice."

Whether that day comes or not, though, Repka said she will continue working in the building until someone tells her it's time to leave.

A tenant for 10 years, she remembers good times in the building, such as when a Democratic organization injected young workers and energy into her floor for a brief time leading up to the 2004 presidential election.

Mostly, though, she has sat in the back with her mountains of paperwork, which she figures will be easy enough to collect if she has to move on.

"To be honest with you," she said, "there's not that much I can do about it one way or the other. It's mostly paper and disorder that I start to sort and get involved with something else."

"So I would just have to make that a priority and clean everything up."