

Sandy-damaged prison to be sold in NYC hotspot

By TOM HAYS Associated Press



PHOTO BY BEBETO MATTHEWS

Former superintendent of the Bayview Correctional Facility, Wendy Featherstone, left, and Reginald Thomas, right, Bayview's maintenance supervisor, discuss removal of furniture from a dental office while touring the building on Monday, Sept. 30, 2013 in the Chelsea section of New York. The former women's prison remains closed a year after Superstorm Sandy caused \$600,000 in damages. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

NEW YORK (AP) — On a recent morning on the west side of Manhattan, Wendy Featherstone showed off a prime piece of real estate that many New Yorkers don't know exists.

The eight-story brick building in Chelsea's gallery district has three terraces, one with views of the Statue of Liberty and cruise ships docking along the Hudson River. There's an indoor pool, basketball court and even a private chapel with stained-glass windows.

Featherstone isn't a pushy real estate agent — she's a prison superintendent. The property once was a medium-security women's lockup called Bayview Correctional Facility. And those terraces? They're really caged-in recreation areas.

The superintendent ran Bayview until Superstorm Sandy made the Hudson surge and sent a wall of water into a facility as she and her workers helplessly looked on.

"You know in the "Ten Commandments," the way the water is when they part the sea? That's how the water was coming down," she recalled as she walked an empty cell block. "It was the river. The river was in here."

Featherstone rode out the storm on a cot in her second-floor office after the power went out. The water receded and no one was harmed. But a year later, the Bayview Correctional Facility remains empty.

The 153 women — serving time for robberies, assaults and lesser crimes — were evacuated a few days before the storm to upstate prisons and never came back. The flooding destroyed boilers and damaged electrical equipment, causing \$600,000 in damage. The state's current budget called for the facility to close by the end of the fiscal year as a cost-saving measure, leaving the building in limbo.

The state has sold other shuttered prisons elsewhere to local governments that have turned them into business parks or to private buyers at auction. The Empire State Development agency is still assessing the best use for Bayview, but its location alone suggests it has more potential than the typical redevelopment stepchild.

Bayview abuts a condominium high-rise designed by French architect Jean Nouvel and topped by a penthouse unit that sold for nearly \$20 million. Promotional material for the high-rise touts neighborhood features that are steps away — a slew of gourmet restaurants, the sprawling Chelsea Piers sports facility and the popular Highline elevated park — but makes no mention of the vertical prison that's in plain view from the upper the floors.

In such a hot neighborhood, potential buyers would swarm if they knew the building could be torn down and replaced with more high-end residential development, said Jonathan Miller, president of real estate appraiser Miller Samuel Inc.

"The value there is in the land, or 'the dirt' as developers call it," he said. "It's all about the dirt."

Miller said it's too soon to estimate the value of the Bayview site, but he cited the recent sale of a nearby lot that once had a gas station for a reported \$23.5 million.

Development of the former prison would be the next step in the colorful history of a site that was built in 1931 as a YMCA known as the Seaman's House, where merchant sailors sought comfort while their ships were docked on the Hudson.

In the late 1960s, the state obtained the property, spent about \$4 million to upgrade it and used it for drug-rehab programs. It was switched to a prison in the 1970s, first for men and later women.

The tiny rooms once occupied by sailors became jail cells with barred windows. Inmates on the west side of the building were the lucky ones: They could see the ships on the Hudson and July 4th fireworks displays.

The indoor pool was shut down and turned into a storage facility that still has elaborate tile and the words "Shallow" on one end and "Deep" on the other. Remaining is a large mural showing a tall ship adrift on a stormy sea, inscribed with, "They that go down to the sea in ships/These men see the works of the Lord."

Scattered around the building are an old dentist's X-ray machine, dusty file cabinets and evidence of its former occupants — a sign in a classroom reading, "You can change your life by altering your thoughts."

Featherstone is unsentimental when asked about Bayview's uncertain future.

"I have accepted this as part of the transition," she said. "I can't imagine it as anything else. I just see it as a prison."