

Cioffi criticizes Gillette project as too expensive

By ROGER NOYES

Despite the appeals of Legislature Minority Leader Cristine Cioffi, D-Niskayuna, the county's contract to buy the dilapidated Gillette House and a neighboring property at the entrance to the Stockade in downtown Schenectady has gone into effect.

Cioffi had argued that the cost to rehabilitate the properties is too great.

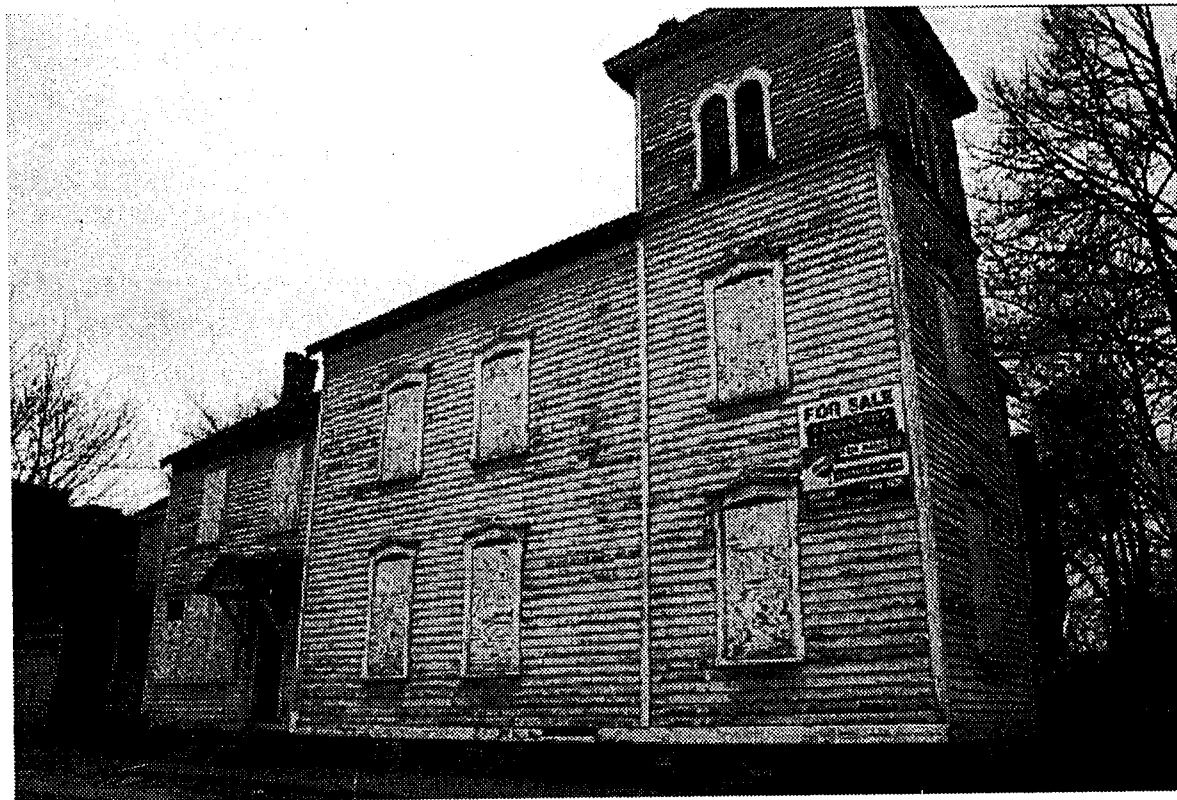
She said a structural/environmental contingency in the purchasing contract would have allowed the county to exit the \$83,500 purchase contract negotiated with owner Russ Millington before it went into effect at midnight on April 17.

"I don't believe there are other buyers for this property. Let's cut from this project," Cioffi said. "I was worried we'd get swept along in (Legislature Chairman) Bob Farley's wish list."

The Gillette house, built in the early 1900s, was formerly owned by Elizabeth Gillette, a physician and state assemblywoman who lived in it until she died in the 1960s.

Cioffi sent a memo to legislators on April 17 urging that a special meeting be called so the county could exit the agreement and work at renegotiating the price for the Gillette house at 252 Union St. and the former Ladd's gas station at 250 Union.

"I believe that these are still worthy projects, but I do not



The county Legislature approved buying the Gillette House, above, at the entrance to the Schenectady Stockade, despite some lawmakers' concerns about the cost of rehabilitating the building. *Jim Franco*

believe we are acting responsibly with taxpayer funds by proceeding under the current contract," Cioffi wrote to legislators.

The \$800,000 that Cioffi said would be needed to rehabilitate the Gillette and Ladd properties could be better spent elsewhere, she said.

A rehabilitation scheme could be less costly for the county if more time were taken to consider other approaches to developing the properties, she added.

Cioffi suggested forming a partnership with private groups to develop the building. To date, the county has gotten cost estimates for converting the Gillette house into museum space or offices.

Schenectady-based Synthesis architects had estimated the cost to be \$625,000, but Cioffi said that estimate didn't include expenses for environmental remediation or related fees.

The county has secured about \$500,000 in state grants for the project — an amount that Farley,

R-Glenville, said would be enough to accomplish most of the job.

"That is why we went and asked for that amount of money," he said.

Farley contended that Cioffi's cost estimates are too high and indicate an attempt to defeat the project.

"They're not accurate," he said of the estimates. "Cristine Cioffi has been trying to kill this project from day one. She has become incredibly partisan and negative."

Regardless of whose estimate is accurate, he said, the contract is a done deal — the structural contingency on the purchase contract would only have allowed the county to exit the agreement if the building didn't meet structural specifications outlined in the document.

He said that outside of state funds, the county's contribution would not exceed the purchase price and some minimal architectural fees — probably a total of about \$100,000 beyond the grant.

Farley said the purchase price has already been approved by the Legislature and the next step is to work on a development scheme.

Besides structural work, some environmental remediation at the site is also necessary, such as removing lead-contaminated soil that is approximately 1 foot deep. Remediation is expected to cost \$35,000.

In other business, a special meeting of the Legislature was called for Wednesday, April 25.

Since population shifts indicated by the 2000 Census suggest that representation on the Legislature is disproportionate, lawmakers were expected to decide Wednesday whether or not to add one more seat in each of two suburban Legislative districts: District 3, which includes Glenville and Niskayuna; and District 4, which includes Rotterdam, Princetown and Duanesburg.