

Visitor centre planned for ex-courthouse

By Caroline McMorran
reporter@northern-times.co.uk

DORNOCH'S courthouse could be turned into a high-end, "Carnegie themed" visitor centre, it has emerged.

American inward investors Todd and Liz Warnock, who own the town's luxury golfing hotel Links House, have expressed an interest in purchasing the Grade B property and converting it into a quality visitor destination.

But they say they will not go ahead with any development unless Highland Council agrees to keep the town's service point open. It is one of 23 earmarked for closure.

The couple have promised to invest £750,000 in the project but want the community to show its support by raising £20,000. A fundraising drive has already been launched by Dornoch Area Community Interest Company (DACIC).

The spacious building is owned by chartered surveyor Sinclair Mackintosh who confirmed he is in negotiations with the Warnocks.

Plans on the table include a "House of Bruar style" tearoom, specialist whisky shop and delicatessen, plus a spa. The centre would pay homage to philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, former owner of Skibo Castle.

Community leaders this week welcomed the initiative and said it would consolidate a £80,000 marketing drive, announced last week by DACIC, to make Dornoch and the wider area a short break destination.

Dornoch Sheriff Court and Justice of the Peace Court controversially closed in December 2013. The court was one of 10 across Scotland to have fallen victim to a cost cutting exercise by the Scottish Court Service.

However, the building has remained open as it also houses the town's Highland Council service point cum tourist information point.

The Warnocks have made it clear that, before investing in the courthouse, they will be looking for a commitment from Highland Council to retain the service point for at least five years.

The Dornoch service point is under threat of closure as the cash-strapped authority battles to keep within its budget. A review is being undertaken by the council.

Following the court closure, DACIC looked into purchasing the building under land reform legislation but eventually concluded it could not proceed under the terms of the act.

Mr Mackintosh confirmed this week that he had bought the property for an undisclosed sum. The deal was concluded only last month.

Mr Mackintosh said: "I am the owner

and I bought it with a view to relocating my offices there and letting out the rest of it. There is a demand for office suites in Dornoch.

"Mr Warnock came to me while I was in the process of negotiating the purchase and said he wanted to buy it from me. He now has the option to buy, subject to what he is going to do for the benefit of Dornoch.

"That option expires on 31st March. There has got to be a time limit on it because I am paying for the heating, insurance and all the maintenance charges."

Mr Mackintosh added: "If this comes off, it will be good for Dornoch. The reason for transferring it to Mr Warnock is not for me to make money out of it, it is for him to demonstrate that he is going to do all this investment for the good of Dornoch. If he does that, I am happy."

American financier and golf enthusiast Mr Warnock, who is based in Chicago, fell in love with Dornoch and its golf course on a trip to the town more than a decade ago.

He and his wife subsequently purchased the 200-year-old Links House, a former Free Church manse which was in a dilapidated state, and turned it into a luxury hotel aimed at the golfing market. It opened in June 2013.

Mr Warnock is understood to be on holiday and was not available for comment this week.

DACIC chairwoman Jenifer Cameron said: "This is a unique opportunity to develop the courthouse building and could not have come at a better time. We are very happy to see new investment in Dornoch.

"We're asking for pledges, not money at the moment, and we've raised £10,500 in under a fortnight so there is obviously a huge amount of support out there," she said.

East Sutherland and Edderton councillor Jim McGillivray, vice-chairman of DACIC, also welcomed the project.

He said: "Mr Warnock's plans for a potential initiative at the courthouse, subject to private agreement with Mr Mackintosh, are to be warmly welcomed.

"I hope that Highland Council can see the common sense in leaving the council service point where it is as part of the commercial development of these premises."

He added: "I also commend the part that DACIC is playing in assisting this potential development and in the many other initiatives which are being pursued as part of Highland and Island Enterprise's Dornoch masterplan, all by diligent and industrious voluntary effort and with no publicly funded development officer support."



Inward investors: American financier Todd Warnock and his wife Liz.