

For five months, Laws Auction and Antiques Inc. sat on more than \$100,000 it owed Prince William County after an auction last year, breaking its contract with the county and violating the state's auctioneering regulations.

The incident, which prompted the county School Board's attorney to draft a lawsuit and netted the company fines and a suspension in April, was just one of nine cases filed with the Virginia Board for Auctioneers against Laws Auction since 1991. The board's administrator said this week that Laws has had more complaints in the last

The company's auctioneering license was revoked earlier this month after it was found guilty of 24 violations of state regulations that stemmed from four cases filed this year.

The company's owner and attorney both have said that the violations were because of "clerical errors" and were merely "technical violations." Sonny Laws said his company's blunders were caused in part by personal problems and mistakes made at the bookkeeping level. Records indicate, however, that strings of financial concerns led to dozens of bounced checks, some of which totaled more than \$100,000.

Merle W. Fallon, Laws's attorney, said

and that the cases he has worked with—most of which came after the county's complaint—were linked to "insignificant" errors over a short time.

"I can't answer questions that have to do with the Prince William County case because I don't know anything about it," Fallon said. "The ones I have been involved with were only bookkeeping errors. I haven't had a chance to fully review all of the files."

According to state records, Laws Auction owed Prince William and the county's public schools \$101,205 after a May 17, 1997, auction of surplus inventory, mostly used cars, buses, computers and office equip-

HISTORIC SITE FILE, BEVERLEY MILL
PRINCE WILLIAM PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM
RELIC/Bull Run Reg Lib Manassas, VA

Investigators say the historic mill must be stabilized before they can go in to determine how the Oct. 22 fire was set.



BY TRACY A. WOODWARD—THE WASHINGTON POST

Restore, Not Raze, Historic Mill, Engineer Says

By LEEF SMITH and JENNIFER ORDONEZ
Washington Post Staff Writers

An engineer who specializes in historic structures had good news Wednesday for those concerned about the future of Beverley's Mill, the 18th-century mill just east of Fauquier in Prince William County that was gutted by fire last week.

"I'm not willing to say how it should be put back. I'm willing to say it should not be torn down," said engineer William J. Davis, a consultant who has worked on restorations of other historic mills. "That may mean from restoring it as ruins to restoring it as a working mill again."

A group of investors that was close to buying the mill before it caught fire hired Davis to assess the damage. On Wednes-

day morning, preservationists, engineers and private residents met among the smoldering remains to talk about what to do next.

Since the fire Oct. 22, which officials say was arson, local preservation groups and historians have feared that the remains of the six-story stone building, which was built in 1742, would be torn down.

But earlier this week, Prince William Public Works officials said Beverley's Mill is not an immediate hazard and will be left undisturbed pending a structural evaluation by engineers working for the mill's owner.

For months, a group of private investors interested in a nonprofit restoration project has considered buying the mill, said Charles Seilheimer, a real estate investor and member of the group. Days before the

mill caught fire, Seilheimer said, the group's attorneys met with attorneys for Athalle Irvine Smith, the mill's owner, to discuss the structure's future.

Davis was hired by Seilheimer, a longtime Fauquier resident who now lives in Orange, Va., and who accompanied him to the mill yesterday. Seilheimer would not identify the investors except to say that they are from Fauquier and "all interested in the preservation of the beauty and history of the Bull Run Mountains."

The group, he said, still is assessing whether to buy the property now that it has been gutted. "It isn't a question of the money involved in the purchase. It's a question of the money involved in what you do with the mill," Seilheimer said.

Attorneys for Smith, who lives in California, did not return calls.

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