

B'ville to get \$100K grant

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Plans to restore the 176-year-old Brentsville Courthouse and a collection of other 19th-century buildings to their former glory took a giant step closer to reality last week.

Hoping to give the historic, but crumbling, buildings a new lease on life, the Virginia's Commonwealth Transportation Board voted Thursday to allocate \$100,000 in grant money to transform the courthouse and a nearby schoolhouse, jail and church into a living history village.

"We're thrilled," said Jan Cunard, chairwoman of the Brentsville Historic Centre Trust and the Friends of the Brentsville Courthouse. "We're interested in an authentic restoration that will give visitors a living history, and this certainly puts us well on our way."

Supporters plan to recreate an 1830s era village in the heart of Brentsville. And they hope the result - dubbed the "Brentsville Historical Area Park" - will become one of the county's top tourism draws and educational resources.

If the transportation grant receives final approval, it would be just the latest in a series of coups for the project, which began with a vision - but little cash - two years ago.

"We went through some tough time in the beginning and got so much rejection," Cunard said. "But now things have finally turned around. There's enthusiasm now. It's great."

Cunard said the idea began to take flight last June when Prince William County supervisors approved spending \$27,000 to add the tiny, 1870s-era Brentsville Union Church to the menagerie.

Five months later, Prince William County, the Park Authority and the county Historical Commission joined forces with the Friends to create an eight-member historic trust to oversee restoration and operation of the project.

And over the past year, the Virginia General Assembly has approved \$75,000 in state funding for the historical center. The project has also accumulated about \$25,000 in local matching funds.

During the next decade, the trust plans to transform the aging buildings into a living history village that will draw tourists and tie in with nearby attractions like the Manassas National Battlefield Park and the Manassas Museum.

Supervisor L. Ben Thompson, R-Brentville, has called the project as "a place where people can see what life was like" in the mid-1800s.

Cunard said at least some of the grant money would be used to stabilize the aging courthouse and church and to perform detailed archeological studies to determine what other buildings might have once stood on the site.

The study might also turn up some interesting artifacts, since the area was a major center of activity during the Civil War, she said.

"The dig will give us a lot more information about this site," Cunard said. "Based on what we find out, we may want to recreate some buildings. We also want to make sure we don't end up putting a parking lot on top of an old church site."

The transportation grant is just part of the Virginia Department of Transportation's proposed \$2.5 billion budget, which also includes about \$1.2 billion for highway improvements, \$965 million for road maintenance and \$151 million for rail and public transportation.

Under CTB recommendations, \$273 million in transportation funding would go to Northern Virginia - \$82.7 million for mass transit and \$171.5 million for highway improvements and \$82.7 million, including \$3.4 million to widen the bridge that carries Interstate 95 over the Quantico Creek in Prince William County.

The CTB will meet again June 18 for formal adoption of the transit budget. Funding is contingent on the details of the highway bill Congress appears close to approving.