

Back to the future

Old courthouse in Brentsville headed for restoration

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JM Staff Writer

Squint your eyes outside the 19th-century courthouse on rural Brentsville Road and the two-lane paved thoroughfare fades to dirt, the passing minivans slowly coming to resemble carts on the way to market.

Inside the two-story red brick building, the chilly, echoing chamber that was once Prince William's county seat seems to pine for the deliberations and decisions that once inhabited the structure from 1822 until the county relocated its headquarters to Manassas in 1893.

While the building was used for years after the move — as a school, mattress factory and meeting place — it has been basically vacant for about four years, according to county park authority planner Elizabeth S. Via. Now, a group of county residents has banded together to bring new life to the old building.

Armed with the support of the Prince William Board of County Supervisors, won by unanimous vote Jan. 21, the Friends of the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre will have to wait until the summer to hear about its application for \$725,000 in federal funds to remodel three buildings into a historic village.

"The park authority's interest is to see these structures saved," said Via, "but we can't do it alone," which is why the resident group's assistance is so welcome.

The application will be sent to the Virginia Department of Transportation today, Friends Chairwoman Joan Cunard said last week. VDOT reviews the application, then sends it on to the U.S. Department of Transportation if it passes muster.

Now, Cunard said, "We sit and wait."

"Over the years," the park authority-owned complex "has been kind of neglected, in a sense," said county supervisor L. Ben Thompson, R-Brentsville. "We have made some progress."

"Our immediate objective is to stabilize and prevent deterioration," said Thompson, and the historic village is a "long-term vision."

Eventually, "We would like to take it back to an 1820s courthouse," said Via. "It's a very ambitious project."

What Via and others are visualizing would be a recreation of the original facility, where prisoners were brought in from the red-brick jail to the courthouse's south side to face the judge's dais, set against an imposing wall now beset by peeling plaster.

To the north side sits a white, early-20th century one-room schoolhouse, where a brick building similar to the jail used to house the court clerk's offices.

The project would likely require the services of a historian who could provide an idea of the courthouse's layout, as well as that of the grounds, which Via said likely had a stock and a gallows — and now is home to a small soccer field and picnic tables.

While the acquisition of the funds is crucial to the project, Cunard said, just as important will be a positive reaction from the Brentsville residents who live near the courthouse complex.

"We really want to listen to the citizens of Brentsville to get their input," said Cunard. "I want to hear their concerns up front. ... I'm trying to make this a win-win situation for everybody."

Thompson is confident that renovating the structures won't be aesthetically or socially disruptive to Brentsville residents. "Anything that's done there will be in keeping with the

tradition of the village," he said.

Brentsville residents have been supportive of the project, said county Historical Commission Chairwoman Betty Duley. "They're delighted to have it," she said. "I see nothing that can be controversial."

In keeping with a commitment to public information, the park authority will hold public hearings and meetings in the spring to introduce and discuss its plans for the site, Via said.

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Prince William Public Library
Manassas, Va.

"We hope it can be a truly historic center," said committee vice chairman Gerald P. McMahon, a Manassas resident, of the three buildings. The courthouse was built in 1822 and used until 1893; the jailhouse building was constructed in 1821, and the schoolhouse was erected in 1910.

The jail is now being used for a ranger station, while the schoolhouse is an office for park authority landscape maintenance staff. The courthouse is the only building not presently in use, Via said, having been basically empty — save some tables, chairs and an imposing portrait of Edwin Clark, a former clerk of the county's courts from 1887 to 1911 — for about four years.

"This is something fine to start with," McMahon said of the site. "This is a fascinating story."

The board showed further support of the courthouse group at its Jan. 7 meeting, when it approved nearly \$13,000 in county funding for the committee's efforts. Most of that money will be used for maintenance on the buildings, while a smaller portion will go toward an application by the group for state nonprofit status, Cunard said.

The federal funds would come from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, the same source that is funding renovations to Washington Street in Haymarket. The Brentsville project will include the removal of the Lucasville Road Bridge over Broad Run and replacing the bridge north of the courthouse over Broad Run.

"It's very competitive," said Cunard, who estimated that the state receives between \$6 and \$8 million for ISTEA projects, and it gets \$25 to \$40 million worth of requests.

"It's rare that this goes through on the first try," said Cunard, "but it's also very rare to have three buildings that are standing that are just perfect for restoring."

"We're always hopeful," said Thompson.

"There's a lot of talented people in that group. ... They did put together a very professional-looking application.

The project is not completely dependent on the grant, said Cunard, but without federal funding

it will take much longer and require more intensive fund-raising efforts.

Duley had warm words for Thompson, who has been extremely supportive of Cunard's group. "He truly cares," said Duley of Thompson. "He's interested, and he's very proud of the project."

The board's endorsement came Jan. 22 and has been joined by similar stamps of approval

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from the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments and the park authority board.

Those boards are just part of the growing entourage of support the project has, Cunard said, as her group's application will also be accompanied by letters from the county's historical commission, Historic Prince William and the county's genealogical society.

"It could be the most wonderful thing historically that's happened to this county in many many years," said Duley. "Great possibilities can evolve from this."

Cunard said she also hoped to get letters of support from area legislators — one from state Del. Harry J. Parrish was already in the fold on Friday, she said, with others on the way — along with other county supervisors.

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L. Ben Thompson
Brentsville supervisor