

Manassas mayor gives thumbs up for demolition

By DENISE MAROIS
of the Potomac News

Manassas Mayor Edgar Rohr overrode an architectural committee decision Tuesday by voting to raze two historic buildings downtown.

Wreckers will soon demolish the old Prince William County jail and the old Manassas High School as planned by county supervisors, but over the objections of three City Council members, local residents and historic groups.

Rohr cast the deciding vote Tuesday afternoon, overturning a July decision by the city's Architectural Review Board to let the historic structures stand.

Rohr said the buildings were not worth saving.

The City Council tied over the buildings' fate in a 3-3 vote Monday night.

Rohr decided then that he would cast his vote with those favoring demolition, he said. But he took a walk through the old jail Tuesday before consulting the city attorney and going to City Hall to make his



Edgar Rohr: broke council tie.

vote official, Rohr said.

The jail is "jacked up in the back and it's full of pigeons. I wouldn't put any money into it," he said.

—See RAZE, Page A10

RAZE / From A1

"With the information I had, I thought it was best for the city and county ... it was just my decision."

The cleared land will probably be used for a parking lot, Rohr said.

"I'm not really surprised," said Councilwoman Beth MacDonald, who voted to save the buildings. "He said something to me a couple of days ago that indicated that was how he was going to vote."

Mrs. MacDonald and councilmen J. Steven Randolph, and Robert L. Browne voted Monday night to postpone demolition for one year, to give the county time to sell the buildings. Councilmen John Weber and Maury Gearson and Vice Mayor James Payne voted for the demolition, citing the possibility of strained relations with the county should the council turn down its request.

The resulting tie left the decision up to Rohr. City Clerk Ralph H. Moore said the city code required Rohr to cast a deciding vote before the next regularly scheduled meeting.

County officials "has been very straightforward in their approach," Weber said Tuesday. "They are willing to save the buildings that the city is interested in, the old courthouse and the Bennett School."

"Razing the jail and school is in the best economic interest of the city and county, which has been cooperating for the last three years on sewer and water issues, he said.

Relations between the two "have never been better. ... I want to make sure that continues," Weber said.

Rohr's vote was "not entirely unexpected, but it was disappointing," said Eric Persson, director of Historic Manassas Inc., a private group established to promote the city's historic downtown.

Persson said local realtors told him they were unaware the buildings were for sale, and that some may have been interested in buying them. Persson's only consolation in seeing the buildings torn down is that they will leave "a big hole" in the city, he said. Perhaps people will realize a parking lot does not contribute as much as a piece of history, he said.

Persson said he cannot understand the rush to tear down the buildings. Destroying them erodes part of a city's history, he said.

"The one heartening thing that has come out of this is that people have started to be concerned about their architectural heritage," Persson said. "At least it's a starting point."

While disappointed by Rohr's vote, councilman Browne said he believes everyone on the council acted in the best interest of the city.

The city's Architectural Review Board voted in July to grant the county demolition permits for four other historical buildings it owns, but decided to let stand the jail, built in 1892, and the school, built in the early 1920s.

County supervisors subsequently asked the City Council to overturn the board's denial, allowin demolition of the school and jail.

The old jail was built when the old county courthouse was built on adjacent property, according to "Prince William: A Past to Preserve," published by the Prince William Historical Commission.

It's a two-story brick-and-stone building with a metal-covered roof.

The county stopped using the building as a jail in the 1950s, and for years it housed the county Sheriff's Department, now at the new Judicial Center on Lee Avenue.

The Bennett School, which the county has agreed to save, was built in 1908 as one of the state's first public agricultural high schools. It is a two-story brick building built on two acres of land donated by Dr. M.C. Bennett.

It was eventually used for primary instruction and teacher training rather than agricultural education. In 1969, it was converted to county offices.