

# Demolition Plans Runs into Opposition

By DIANE HARTSON 7/9/86  
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Prince William County was accused Tuesday night of being an "absentee landlord" that wants to put a shopping center at the site of the six buildings the county wants to demolish in the city of Manassas.

A number of opponents to the county's request for permission to demolish the buildings spoke out at a public hearing before the Manassas Architectural Review Board Tuesday night.

The county has asked for a permit to demolish the Bennett Annex, the old planning office, the old jail, the schoolmaster's cottage at the Bennett complex, the old sheriff's office and a quonset hut, all in the Peabody Street-Lee Avenue area, near the Judiciary Center and the old county courthouse on Lee Avenue. The county still owns a number of buildings in that area which were originally part of the county government complex when the town of Manassas was the county seat.

The county must have permission from the ARB to tear down the buildings, under the provisions of the city's historic district ordinance.

Although Prince William Deputy County Executive Larry Hughes attended the hearing, no one spoke in favor of the demolition.

But representatives of several city organizations expressed opposition to demolition of at least some of the buildings, saying that they were historically significant to Manassas and Prince William.

Randy Turberville, vice chairman of the Manassas Historic Committee revealed that there is a possibility that the county would like to sell the property to a developer for a "Williamsburg-style" shopping center.

"I think that would be totally inappropriate there," he said.

Hughes said later that reports that

a shopping center was planned for the site were just "rumors." He added that the county had been approached by a developer looking for a site for a shopping center, who was shown the property in the courthouse area on a map, along with other tracts owned by the county.

Museum Curator Dour Harvey presented the ARB with a copy of the minutes of the May 13 meeting of the county's historical commission. In those minutes, it is reported that Hughes told the commission that "a private developer wanted to buy all the land he could see within the Manassas complex. Another developer expressed interest in constructing a Williamsburg-style retail mall in the area."

Tom Shaughnessy, speaking on behalf of Historic Manassas Inc., the city's downtown revitalization group, said he was concerned that the county has given no indication of what they would like to do with the property if the buildings are demolished.

"I don't hear anyone here asking for approval... no one is saying after the buildings are torn down what they're going to do," Shaughnessy said. "I'm struck by the absence of information before the board today."

Calling the county "absentee owners in our community... who let the buildings sit there and fall into disrepair," Shaughnessy said the two alternatives before the ARB were "not attractive."

"The alternatives are to continue the deterioration... or bulldoze them," he said.

Most of the speakers who opposed the demolition supported saving at least two of the structures, the old Bennett Annex and the old jail.

The Bennett Annex was built in the 1920's and was the first Manassas High School building. The

old jail was built in 1892, at the same time as the old courthouse. According to Harvey, who also spoke at the hearing, the old jail shares many of the design features of the courthouse and is meant to be paired with that building.

Eric Persson, executive director of Historic Manassas, said that the buildings should be looked at individually and not as a single request.

He added that the Bennett Annex, which has about 17,000 square feet of space, would be very attractive to developers who are looking for older buildings to renovate.

"It's one of the largest existing buildings (in the city)... and would be good for mixed use," Persson said. "That is a quality that developers look for."

Persson added that he had spoken with several such developers who

were looking for older buildings in the Manassas area.

He asked that the demolition request for the annex, the old jail and the cottage be denied.

Hughes said later that the county was "reluctant to see the complex subdivided and it's unlikely that they would sell one corner off of the complex. One value of the area is that it is a large area."

He added that the county has no firm plans for the property, but wants to tear down the buildings because maintenance costs are so high. He added that he didn't know what the county spends to maintain the buildings.

Hughes also said that the cost of renovating the buildings would be prohibitive.

The ARB delayed action on the See THEY LOOK on A-2.



Michael Brannon—The Journal Messenger

## Old Jail

The old jail was built in 1892, at the same time as the old county courthouse, and shares many of that building's architectural features. County officials say that the old jail and five other buildings slated for destruction, are in very poor repair and have requested permission to demolish the structures because of high maintenance costs.

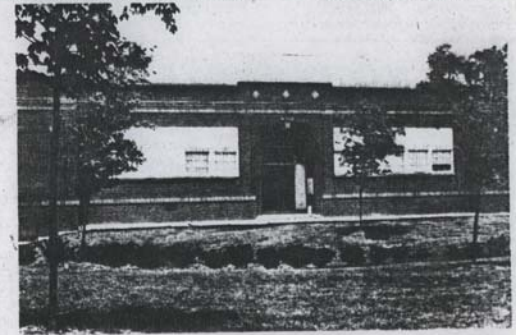
The government would do well

## They Look

Continued from A-1.

matter until its next meeting, scheduled for July 24. Under city requirements, the ARB must take action on the request by July 25, unless the board of county supervisors approves an extension. The ARB has asked the City Council to request that extension.

The county also owns the Bennett building and the old county courthouse in that area, but has no plans to demolish them. Hughes said that county and city officials had begun preliminary talks on renovating the old courthouse.



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## Bennett Annex

Built in the 1920's, the old Bennett Annex (above) housed the original Manassas High School and Osbourn High School. It is one of six buildings in the courthouse area that Prince William County wants to demolish.