

Fate of historic buildings in hands of supervisors

By CLINT SCHEMMER
of the Potomac News

The fate of three historic Manassas buildings hinges on what city officials do Tuesday with Prince William County's request to demolish much of its decaying government complex.

Prince William supervisors want to raze six buildings vacated during the past two years when courts and agencies moved to the regional Judicial Center in downtown Manassas and the James J. McCoart Administration Center on Davis Ford Road.

At stake are the old county jail, built to match the courthouse in 1892; a two-story brick jail added in the 1950s; the J.P. Pullen House, a two-story clapboard home built on Peabody Street about 1905; the 17,000-square-foot Manassas High School; a small brick home that housed the principal and, later, a nurses' dormitory; and a metal Quonset Hut on Church Street.

A tour of the buildings Friday afternoon left some Manassas officials questioning the county's rush to bring in the bulldozers and destroy buildings that express the city's history.

"It's not sensible to hurry and demolish these buildings when you've already allowed them to deteriorate to the condition they're in," said John Payne, chairman of the city's Architectural Review Board. "When you tear down a building you can never rebuild something like it, particularly Manassas High School, for today's costs."

"It's not sensible to hurry and demolish these buildings when you've already allowed them to deteriorate to the condition they're in. When you tear down a building you can never rebuild something like it ... for today's costs."

—John Payne, Manassas Architectural Review Board chairman

The panel will discuss the issue at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday in City Hall, despite the Manassas Historical Committee's request for a delay until July 5.

The board has little choice but to do so, Payne said. If it failed to consider the request by July 29, within 60 days of the county's permit applications, city ordinance would force Manassas to automatically issue the demolition permits.

Two private developers have expressed an interest in the downtown property once the buildings are gone, Deputy County Executive Lawrence Hughes said.

One developer wanted to buy all the land he could within the government complex, Hughes told the Prince William Historical Commission earlier this month.

Another told Woodbridge District Supervisor Don Kidwell he would consider building a Williamsburg-style retail mall there, he said.

The county Department of General Services says the jail and Pullen house are so

unsafe they endanger other property and people's lives. The others would cost too much to renovate for new tenants, according to Hughes.

"I'm not into the plunder of antiquities, contrary to what some members of the [Architectural Review Board] might think," he said. "In this case, we had to decide the difference between historic buildings and old buildings, and I think we have done that. These buildings have outlived their usefulness."

The Board of County Supervisors, he noted, budgeted \$175,000 to begin restoring the Victorian Romanesque courthouse built by Manassas when it wrested the county seat from Brentsville. The money will buy a new roof and repair the courthouse's cupola and its clocks.

The supervisors haven't settled on a new use for the three-story courthouse, although some favor remodeling it to house a county museum.

Prince William also intends to save Ben-

nett School, a stately brick-and-sandstone structure built in 1908 as one of 10 agricultural high schools in Virginia. It houses county police today.

Contractors have bid on the demolition job, which entails bulldozing the buildings, removing their foundations, filling, grading and planting grass seed. County workers already stripped the jail and Pullen house of banisters and decorative wood framing, storing them in the old courthouse. "As soon as we get our ducks in a row with the city, we'll proceed," Hughes concluded.

The request poses a dilemma for a city so proud of its heritage that municipal stationery boasts Manassas is "Rich in Historic Interest."

Payne and others say the county has acted prematurely, before evaluating renovation options or offering a detailed plan for the government complex's future.

Eric Persson, director of the city's Main Street Project, said the county should estimate what it will cost to rehabilitate some of the old buildings versus demolishing them and building new ones.

All six buildings could be saved for renovation, Persson said. Payne said he favors preserving the jail, Manassas High School and the Pullen house.

But Hughes told the historical commission May 13 that saving the jail was "out of the question," the group's minutes state.