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County supervisors agree to purchase Rippon Lodge

By ALFRED M. BIDDLECOMB
Staff Writer *

Calling it a "once in a lifetime" opportunity, the Prince William Board of County Supervisors agreed to purchase Rippon Lodge on Tuesday to ensure the colonial tract is preserved for historic and educational opportunities.

The \$1.4 million purchase keeps the 275-year-old Woodbridge home from being acquired by a private buyer and an uncertain future, said Supervisor Hilda Barg, D-Woodbridge, who lobbied for the purchase.

"This was a very unique opportunity, and we couldn't let this slip away," Barg said following a public hearing on the

sale. "This was a once in a lifetime chance that the owners decided to sell to the county."

Built by Richard Blackburn, an Englishman who named it for the town of Ripon in Yorkshire, England, the 40-acre site has remained in the same family since its construction in 1725.

When the family of Debra Black Decko decided to sell the home, county officials began negotiating the purchase, County Executive Craig Gerhart said.

County supervisors could have faced a situation recently experienced by Alexandria officials who were unable to block the sale of Robert E. Lee's boyhood home by a museum foundation to a private buyer earlier this year.

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The Rippon Lodge transaction was a matter of buying now while working out the specifics later, Gerhart said.

"This is the first step in getting this property ready for its public use," County Executive Craig Gerhart said. "Grants have been applied for and there will need to be some structural work done which will cost around \$300,000."

County officials have yet to

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indicate what agency will oversee the day-to-day operations of Rippon Lodge, once it's put into public service. County supervisors said they want to see an interpretive educational program similar to what is currently on display at Mount Vernon or Colonial Williamsburg.

The purchase will be supported by money from the county's tax on hotel rooms which is earmarked for travel promotion projects.

There was no opposition to the sale during a public hearing which featured many speaking in favor of the historical acquisition.

Rippon Lodge, like the Brentsville Courthouse and Ben Lomond Manor House near Manassas, would "encourage

tourists to visit Prince William County and stay in our hotels while also eating at our restaurants," said Supervisor John Jenkins, D-Neabsco, justifying the use of the hotel tax to purchase the colonial property.

"All these sites by themselves don't do it," Gerhart said about promoting the county's historical wealth. "We have to find a way to package all these sites together."

Rippon Lodge was listed nationally on the real estate market for \$1.6 million, according to Bob Wilson, county public works director, whose department will oversee the colonial property's transition during the early stages of county ownership.