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FOREST PRESERVE BOARD DECIDES TO DEMOLISH CHURCHILL STRUCTURES

In a shocking decision, the Board refuses to even consider hiring an architect to review options to demolition

By Robert Sanchez, Daily Herald Staff Writer, Wednesday, July 19, 2006

Efforts to save two shuttered 1930s-era buildings at Churchill Woods Forest Preserve in Glen Ellyn have suffered a surprise death blow.

The DuPage County Forest District board is refusing to reconsider its decision to raze the limestone structures, which once housed the district's headquarters and its first superintendent, Robert McKee.

Commissioners voted in March to demolish the buildings because restoring them would cost an estimated \$450,000.

That vote prompted months of lobbying by McKee's descendants and Glen Ellyn history enthusiasts to spare the structures. So district President Dewey Pierotti sought to have an architectural firm give a second opinion about the restoration costs. But when commissioners Tuesday learned it would cost up to \$25,000 to hire a Darien-based firm, they didn't even vote on the proposed contract.

As a result, both buildings are expected to face the wrecking ball, although a demolition date hasn't been set. "We can't save every single building," Commissioner Joseph Cantore said. "I wish we could. But we can't."

Chris Wilson, president of Citizens For Glen Ellyn Preservation, had long heard the argument that renovating the Churchill Woods buildings would be too expensive. Still, she said she expected the forest preserve board to make sure the \$450,000 restoration estimate was accurate. "I just feel like I was hit," Wilson said. "This is quite a shock. I don't know what to do at this point."

Earlier during the meeting, Wilson told commissioners her group had learned the original McKee residence might qualify for a listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Pierotti had promised that staff planners would give the demolition issue another look. But in the end, he couldn't muster any commissioners to vote on the architect's contract. "I really felt that it wouldn't have hurt to spend the additional funding to get the more definite answers to some of the questions that were posed," he said.

But Commissioner Roger Kotecki said the forest preserve already is spending millions to maintain a list of historic buildings. They include the 1939 Danada House in Wheaton, the 1920s-era Peabody Estate and the 1850s-era Graue Mill, both in Oak Brook, and the 1890s-era Kline Creek farmhouse in Winfield.

Instead of using \$25,000 to study restoration options for the Churchill Woods buildings, Kotecki said he favored restoring forest preserve land. "We have other buildings that are going to require a lot of resources," Kotecki said. "This is just one that we need to let go."

However, McKee's grandchildren said preserving the original headquarters should be a priority. "It's disturbing to me that they have so little regard for their own history and traditions," said Lance McKee, Robert's grandson, who lives in Massachusetts. "They are just throwing it away."

Barbara Plumer, Robert McKee's granddaughter, was so upset with Tuesday's outcome that she said she won't assist plans to erect a memorial after the buildings are gone. "That's a joke," said Plumer, who lives in North Carolina. "I want the buildings saved. It's a crime to tear them down."

Show your outrage with this decision. Call, email or write the members of the Forest Preserve District of Dupage County Board of Commissioners:

Roger G. Kotecki
2 S 754 Winchester Circle Unit #2
Warrenville, IL 60555
Office: (630) 393-1890
rkotecki@dupageforest.com

D. "Dewey" Pierotti, Jr.
Forest Preserve District President
P.O. Box 5000
Wheaton, IL 60189
(630) 933-7225
dpierotti@dupageforest.com

Marsha Murphy
1208 Farmwood Drive
Addison, IL 60101
Home: (630) 773-1917
mmurphy@dupageforest.com

Joseph Cantore
1S 141 Spring Road, Ste. #208
Oakbrook Terrace, IL 60181
Home: (630) 673-2208
jfcantore@dupageforest.com

Wallace Brown
1308 Gilbert Avenue
Downers Grove, IL 60515
Office: (630) 852-8265
wbrown@dupageforest.com

Gwen Henry
905 W. Elm St.
Wheaton, IL 60187
Office: (630) 665-4440
Home: (630) 665-4230
ghenry@dupageforest.com

Carl Schultz
2740 White Barn Rd.
Aurora, IL 60504
Office: (630) 236-6818
cschultz@dupageforest.com