

Meetings may settle fate of Neely Mansion, Lester depot

by Herb Belanger
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The future of two structures intimately connected to the development and early settlement in King County may hinge on two separate meetings to be held this month.

The first will be at the Auburn City Hall Monday at 7:30 p.m. when people interested in the fate of the Neely Mansion, tied to the early settlement of the the Green River Valley, will meet to see if something can be done about continuing a restoration project which has been halted for lack of funds.

The second meeting will be that of the county's Landmarks Commission, Aug. 11 at 11 a.m. in the eighth-floor conference room of the Alaska Building, Seattle, when a decision will be made on whether the railroad depot in the Cascade Mountain town of Lester should be recognized as a county landmark.

At a public hearing last week, Flo Lentz, cultural-resources specialist, told the commissioners the staff recommendation was that the depot should be accorded landmark status for its contribution to the history of the county and as an example of early-day railroad architecture.

She discounted consideration of the entire town of Lester as a historic district, however, because the

removal of many of the early-day buildings "has eroded the integrity of the town." Most of the remaining buildings date to the 1920s, she said.

The Burlington Northern Railroad has no further use for the depot, which stands in the middle of its 400-foot right-of-way through Lester, and wants to get rid of the building. BN has filed for a demolition permit from the county, but is willing to donate the building for \$1 to any group which will undertake its removal to another site.

Complicating the removal is the fact that Lester is in the city of Tacoma watershed and is slowly becoming a ghost town with only a couple dozen residences occupied now. In the busy railroading days of the 1920s, more than 1,000 people were living in the town.

As the population dwindled, Tacoma demolished many buildings and has left others to deteriorate. There are only two roads into Lester, both unpaved. One is from Interstate 90 across Stampede Pass and is closed in the winter. The other, from Highway 410 southeast of Enumclaw, is not easily accessible because of watershed regulations.

At the hearing, present and former residents of Lester, and railroad buffs — all hoping to save the depot from demolition — were united in their view that the building should get landmark designation. Two representatives of the city of Tacoma watershed

were at the hearing but made no comment.

Research by Lentz disclosed that the depot, built in 1886, does represent the Northern Pacific Railroad's depot design of that era. When the railroad company completed the tunnels at Stampede Pass in 1887, the rail line, a remarkable job of engineering, was the first direct line to the East from Puget Sound. Its completion focused commerce and settlement in Seattle and Tacoma instead of Portland.

The Auburn meeting has been called by Virginia Haugen to try to organize a nonprofit organization aimed at getting the Neely Mansion, built in 1804, in usable condition.

"Several of my friends and I have been interested in forming such a group for a long time," she said, adding that anyone wanting more information could call her at 833-6205.

The initial goal for such a group, she said, would be to clear the yard around the house of weed and brush and to paint the building. She said one estimate on the cost of painting ran between \$3,000 and \$4,000.

Haugen hopes merchants and business firms will provide donations and, if paint is made available, volunteers can be found to paint the building.

She estimated that 75 percent of the work to be done on the building could come from volunteer labor, "although that would be very slow. I don't see it being done in less than five years."

The building is in the National Register of Historic Places and was the second structure placed on the county register of landmarks. Occupied by members of the Neely family until the late 1940s, it subsequently deteriorated until the Auburn Arts Council bought it in 1979 for \$12,000.

About \$100,000 in state and county grants was spent on rehabilitation but funding eventually ran out. The exterior now needs to be painted and windows have to be installed. The interior needs extensive reconstruction.

The Arts Council turned the building over to the county, but some questions exist over ownership of the building and land; the county's Real Property Division is working to resolve them.

The feeling among some county representatives is that steps should be taken to sell or transfer the building to private or commercial enterprises which would agree to complete the necessary work to preserve the building.

Haugen, on the other hand, said she has talked to numerous people who don't want the building to go to private enterprise, but would prefer to have it become an extension of the White River Valley Historical Museum, or a museum in its own right.

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