Putting new life into an old mansion

by Eric Pryne
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AUBURN — Barn swallows have built a nest in one of the upstairs bedrooms of the 84-year-old Neely Mansion. Spiders weave, some so thick you can't see through them, across the corners of the windows.

The hammer on the stairs is loose. One of the two fireplaces doesn't work. The wallpaper is peeling, the plaster is cracking and some of the floors list perilously.

That's what the old house looks like today. Sandy Jackson suggests a return trip in three years.

If that happens, she hopes the Victorian farmhouse east of here will be fully restored, serving the community as a museum and an attraction the domain of the birds, bugs and graffiti artists.

WHAT DREAMS are lost if the former mansion is returned to its former glory? How much will the process of restoration cost? What steps are needed? How will the project be funded?

AUBURN — of which Ms. Jackson is the vice president, and the White River Historical Society are-operation. Ms. Jackson stumbled across the Neely Mansion shortly after moving from Auburn to California four years ago. Like many before her, she was impressed.

"I would have given my right arm to have it," she remembers.

The mansion has weathered years of abuse and disuse, including Trendon tenant of not so long ago who raised chickens upstairs. What remains under the grime today is an architectural gem.

The ornate woodwork, the 12-foot ceilings, the delicate strips of original wallpaper and especially the fireplace are the exterior's speak of another time, another way of living.

The old mansion has a past and mystery to be solved. Why is there a hometown embossed in the plaster of the ceiling above the entry hall?

Aaron Neely built the house in 1894. Ms. Jackson and others have begun negotiations with his heirs to buy the property.

Ms. Jackson admits restoration will be a big job.

"I fully expect to spend many more hours out here myself with a broom," she said.

The $33,000 state grant must be matched by the community, either in cash or volunteer time. Local Kiwanians already have pledged to put in 1,000 hours, and the Jackson said she's been getting calls from entire families volunteering for the day.

Some of the matching funds could come from King County block grant money, but that won't be allocated until summer.

After the exterior and structural repairs are finished, some time next year, it's hoped the Arts Council and Historical Society will apply for more grants for interior restoration, mechanical and electrical improvements and landscaping.

"We hope we can spark people's interest," Ms. Jackson said. "It's a great old place, a real landmark."