Meetings may settle fate of Neely Mansion, Lester depot

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

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

The second meeting will be that of the county's Landmarks Commission, Aug. 11 at 11 a.m. in the high-level executive room of the Alaska Building. Sometime, 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, Flota, cultural specialties specialist, told the commissioners the staff recommendation was that the depot should be accorded landmark status for its contribution to the history of railroad architecture and as an example of early-day rail 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-acre property, and wants to tear it down. The county bought the last of its property in the town for $60,000.

The decision to remove the building was the first direct line from the East to Puget Sound. Its completion focused commerce and settlement in Seattle and Tacoma instead of Portland.

The meeting has been called by Virginia Hagen, who has been trying to organize a nonprofit organization aiming at getting the Neely Mansion, built in 1894, usable condition.

"I have many 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 226-7021.

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

Hagen 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 1840s, it subsequently deteriorated until the Auburn Arts Council bought it in 1976 for $12,000.

About $100,000 in state and county grants was spent on rehabilitation but funding eventually ran out. The exterior would need to be restored and the interior have to be remodeled.

The feeling among some county representatives is that the depot should be sold or transferred to the building to private or commercial enterprises which would agree to complete the necessary work to preserve the building.

Hagen, 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 it become part of the Federal Way Historical Museum, or a museum in its own right.