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 week.

The first will be at the Auburn City Hall Monday at 3:30 p.m. when people interested in the fate of the Neely Mansion at the corner of 1st and Main in the early settlement of the town of Green 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 area and as an example of early 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 for the structure.

Two representatives of the building for $1 to any group which will undertake its removal to another site.

Lentz emphasized the fact that Lester is in the path of the Tacoma waterfront and is slowly becoming a ghost town with only a few dozen residences occupied now. In the bustling railroading days of the 1890s, 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 Intensive 90 across Stampede Pass and is closed in the winter. The other, from Highway 410 southeast of Enumclaw, is not easily accessible because of unsurfaced regulations.

At the hearing, present and former residents of Lester, including members of the Lea family who own the depot from demolition — were united in their view that the building should get landmark designation. Two representatives of the Tacomas office were at the hearing but made no comment.

Research by Lentz disclosed that the depot, built in 1886, was designed by the Northern Pacific Railroad's depot design of that era. When the railroad company completed the tunnels at Stampede Pass in 1887, the line was extended 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 and save the city's historic depot, which is expected to be included in the meeting, held in 1984, in usable condition.

"Several of my friends and I have been interested in keeping the depot for a long time," she said, adding that anyone wanting more information could call her at 432-8873.

The initial goal for such a group, she said, was to preserve the yard around the house of weed and brush and to paint the building. She said one estimate put the cost of painting on between $1,000 and $2,000.

Haugen hopes merchants and business firms will provide donations and, if paint is made available, volunteers can be found to paint the building. The estimate is that just 25 percent of the work has been 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 1980.

About $50,000 in state and county grants was spent on rehabilitation but funding eventually ran out. The exterior still needs to be painted and windows and doors need to be replaced. The interior needs extensive reconstruction.

The Arts Council turned the building over to the county, which has plans to use it for a visual arts center and the building and the county's Real Property Division is working to resolve them.

The feeling among some county representatives is that some should be placed to sell the building to public or commercial enterprises which would agree to 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 ownership. For her, it has become a museum of the White River Valley Historical Museum, or a museum in its own right.