

Architect names ‘top six’ buildings to save in Heritage Preserve

by Mark Sellards

March 14 park board meeting

An independent architect and renovation professional gave the Richfield Joint Recreation District board his “top six” structures in the Richfield Heritage Preserve he thinks should be saved. Tim Franklin of Franklin Associates said during a recent board work session that none of the 14 main buildings in the 336-acre park are beyond restoring, but due to budget restraints he narrowed the list to buildings that could potentially make the district money soon. Franklin said he was forbidden to speak to any board member during the assessment process, so he could present as unbiased view.

“You are very lucky to have a gem of a piece of property,” Franklin said during his presentation. “We assessed based on the money you had ... fully knowing you had the septic system and you had at least one dam to repair. So we took the rest and we itemized.”

About \$3.1 million available

The money the district has to work with comes from two tax levies approved by voters for the purpose of buying and maintaining the preserve. The levies have brought in about \$7.1 million, with about \$3.9 million used to purchase the property. Around \$3.1 million in capital remains for the RJRD board to use for construction and renovation.

Franklin urged the board to begin work immediately on these five structures: Gund Hall, Amity House, North Hall, Kirby Mill and Kirby Hall, in order to get them to the point where they can be used for public events.

“You’ve got beautiful structures that, in our opinion, can generate money,” Franklin said. “My recommendation to the board is get these buildings up and running so they can ... hopefully stand on their own to make money for the park board and for maintenance.”

Franklin advised that the sixth structure on his list, the Coach House, should be secured and mothballed for later renovation. He explained how he thought each of the structures could best be used.

“Gund Hall, obviously with renovations, could easily be used for parties,

weddings and what have you,” Franklin said. “Amity House ... is an ideal place for off-site client meetings, bed and breakfast. ... You could have a wedding party stay there and then get married at Gund Hall because it is a beautiful surrounding property.”

He said the North, Coach and Kirby houses are ideal for corporate off-site meetings. He added the Kirby Mill is a unique place to have smaller meetings.

“If it was me, and I was chairman, [I] would talk to event planners,” Franklin said. “Let them know this is something that you are trying to do and let them work for you to bring the events here.”

What about Garfield Lodge?

Questions arose about the fate of the Garfield Lodge, since it wasn’t on Franklin’s list. The lodge was originally built as a dance hall by Jim Kirby, with boxcar springs under the main floor so it would bounce when people danced.

“Let me put it in simple terms: North, Amity, Gund and the two Kirbys are in the best shape,” said Franklin. “It would be the least amount of money to get those fixed up. If there wasn’t a cap and there’s money that could be raised, there is no reason Garfield can’t be saved. There’s no reason why Carriage can’t be saved.”

He said that if there were private funds or other outside revenue, there’s almost no building that he looked at that couldn’t be saved.

Board member Meg Slifcak said the restoration numbers seemed high; she reasoned that if an old house can be remodeled for \$50,000, why does it cost \$300,000 to renovate some of these buildings?

Franklin said remodeling and restoring buildings are two different things. He said restoring old buildings, particularly ones with brick, lath and plaster takes a lot of extra labor.

“The client’s jaw always drops and when we explain everything ... then they understand,” Franklin said. “And then when the project is done, they understand why.”

Board member Rich Fleming asked about work needed on Amity House, which has serious structural issues in the front wall.

“Here’s how I feel about Amity,” Franklin said. “If you don’t fix that [wall] you are going to lose the house. It’s a pretty simple fix. If the front wall gives there, you will not have the money to fix the house up.”

He said the work to secure the wall would probably cost around \$4,000.

Franklin said the downspouts are “dumping water” inside the house and that mold is an issue. He said that keeping water out of all buildings is really the first and most pressing issue in securing them.

“Water destroys buildings,” Franklin said. “The [six buildings] need at least their roofs repaired. They need downspouts, they need gutters, and they need the water to go away. That will buy you time ... to put a plan together about what you want to do with these buildings.”

Slifcak said the board does not have enough money in the budget to renovate all those buildings. “Our thought was that we would mothball, and then take five years, maybe longer to raise money,” she said, “probably outside the bond program.” She said she thought they could get some of it done.

Following the work session, the board moved directly into the special meeting. It agreed to fund the Woodlands Steward Management Plan for up to \$3,000. Adam Beichler, a forestry consultant from the Wilderness Center in Wilmot, Ohio, described how his group would do an assessment of the forest areas, mapping them out in detail. When the land was purchased by the district, one of the requirements of the Western Reserve Land Conservancy was that the district would have a woodlands plan in place.

Board chairman Bob Becker explained how, due to an earlier agreement between Western Reserve and the Clean Ohio Fund, certain structures on the property were required to be removed to create more green space. Those structures included the units located in the Adirondacks area and Seeley Cabin.

In other business, the board approved technology upgrades for the district office, including new Google software and user fees for close to \$500. The board also agreed to purchase new locks. ∞