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New report on Tilsey Barn has Will County rethinking options

Company's estimate suggests it would cost far less to stabilize structure

Topics Forestry and Timber

By Dennis Sullivan Special to the Tribune September 23, 2009

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The long-running battle to preserve a massive, 19th century barn in Homer Glen got a recent boost from restoration experts who say it could be stabilized with relatively little work.

Rick Collins, owner of Trillium Dell Timberworks, and his project manager, Tim Narkiewicz, said Tilsey Barn -- owned by the Will County Forest Preserve District -- is 85 percent to 90 percent intact with no danger of collapsing.

After an inspection this month, Collins and Narkiewicz suggested that moving a damaged portion of the barn's limestone foundation back in place would cost \$20,000 to \$30,000. A new roof also would be needed, they said.

But Marcy DeMauro, executive director of the forest preserve district, said funds "would have to be pulled from other [district] projects to cover the cost."

DeMauro added that revenues are down \$900,000 to \$1 million for the district's fiscal year 2010 budget compared with the previous year.

Collins and Narkiewicz first inspected the barn in late 2006, then returned to the site this month to conduct another free inspection after reading a Tribune story reporting that some district commissioners wanted to proceed with district staff's five-year-old recommendation to tear down the barn and bury its foundation.

Then, as now, the district's plans to make the 196-acre site in the 16300 block of South Bell Road part of the Messenger Marsh Preserve did not include keeping the barn, milk house and other outbuildings.

The recent inspection was the first action involving the barn since early 2007, when the district board agreed to delay razing the structure after Commissioner Kathleen Konicki, R-Homer Glen, promised that a local group would provide a workable alternative. No alternatives have been proposed.

Collins said his firm could relocate the barn a short distance or disassemble it and reassemble it elsewhere.

Narkiewicz estimated Trillium could restore the barn for use as just a storage facility for \$200,000 or as a historic building for public use for \$300,000 to \$400,000.

Konicki said she opposes moving the barn "because (the barn's) high-profile perch atop the hill along the road, where everyone can see her from all directions, is what's made her so familiar."

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The commissioner acknowledged there is no money for a restoration project but said stabilizing the structure would be the first step in making it "shovel ready" whenever state or federal money becomes available.

In the meantime, district employees are investigating the feasibility of selling the barn over the Internet.

DeMauro suggested the wood could be salvaged and sold to a company that makes products out of barn wood, but Narkiewicz said there is a glut of barn wood as more barns are razed.

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