

New life for restoration plan

High school deal allows Watsonville to annex historic Redmond House



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Kaell Reader picks up debris Wednesday around the historic Redmond House, which preservationists hope to restore.

Historic House S - South County Site excluded from no-annexation pledge

By STETT HOLBROOK
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WATSONVILLE — Supporters of a plan to restore a dilapidated 103-year-old farmhouse got an unexpected boost from negotiations for a new Pajaro Valley high school.

The Redmond House Committee is a non-profit group working to purchase a faded Queen Anne Victorian and the 13 acres it sits on west of Highway 1. The group hopes to restore the William Weeks-designed home and use it as a base to promote tourist and ecological attractions in Santa Cruz County, particularly in the Pajaro Valley.

"I've driven by that house for years, watched it deteriorate and said, 'Someone ought to do something about it,' " said John Skinner, committee chairman.

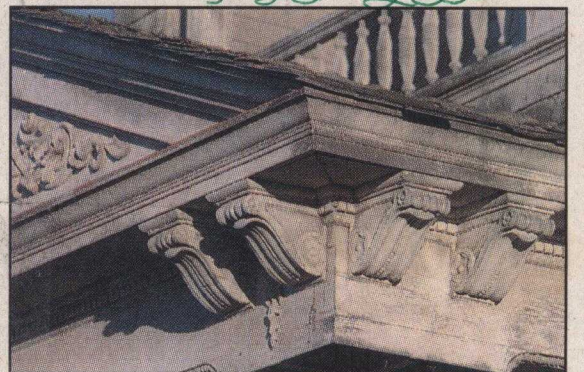
That might be easier now.

As part of an agreement the Watsonville City Council signed earlier this month to win support for a new high school on Harkins Slough Road, the city agreed to forgo new annexations west of Highway 1. But in a little-discussed footnote to the deal, the Redmond House property, also known as Green Farm, was excluded from the no-annexation pledge.

Annexation of the parcel to the city would bring needed sewer and fire service to the property, and open the possibility of rezoning it from commercial agriculture to some other use.

"It really puts a whole new light on (restoration efforts)," said Karell Reader, a member of the Redmond House Committee.

The house is in an unincorporated area off West Beach Road but surrounded by city land.



Noted architect William Weeks designed the 103-year-old Queen Anne Victorian.

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In negotiations with the county, Pajaro Valley Unified School District, state Coastal Commission and area environmentalists, city officials argued successfully to keep the land on tap for possible annexation.

"We've had a long-term interest in annexing that property," said Carlos Palacios, Watsonville city manager.

He said he supports some kind of tourist use for the property like a restaurant or bed and breakfast, but the city first needs to initiate annexation proceedings.

The land was part of a failed attempt to annex 681 acres in 1977.

With the possibility the land will come under city control, committee members are stepping up a fund-raising campaign to buy it. They have a long way to go.

The committee holds an option through November to buy the property for \$2.4 million. It is owned by a Green Farm LLP, a limited partnership. Restoring the house and related costs would bring the total project cost to \$4 million, Reader said.

Skinner said the group plans to appeal to state legislators for money and political support.

County Supervisor Walt Symons, whose district includes the property,

said he is "totally opposed" to the project if it paves over any farmland or moves the house off site.

Committee members at one time considered moving the house to a different location on the property, but said they now are committed to leaving it where it is and keeping the surrounding land in production.

The committee hopes the house would be self-supporting and serve as a gateway for tourist attractions in the area like farmers markets, wineries, and the Agricultural Workers History Center planned for the new Watsonville Public Library.

"It could be a wonderful magnet to draw people off Highway 1," Skinner said.

Reader wants the house to serve as a history lesson, showing visitors what farming was like 100 years ago. The house was built in 1897 for sugar beet farmer James Redmond.

One of Reader's ideas for the property is a demonstration garden featuring turn-of-the-century crops like wheat and hops.

She said the house also could serve as a place for the fairgrounds-based Agricultural History Project to display its old farm tools and tractors.

"It will be a kind of bustling place if it gets on its feet," she said.