

Historic Houses - South Co Once and future queen

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The Redman House, slowly falling to pieces next to Highway 1 at the Riverside Drive exit, was built in 1897.

Museum project would restore decaying Watsonville landmark

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
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WATSONVILLE — An architectural jewel of the Pajaro Valley sits rotting in a field of strawberries next to Highway 1, at the Riverside Drive exit.

Built in 1897 by famed Central Coast architect William Weeks, the slowly deteriorating 2½-story Victorian waits patiently for someone to restore it to its former grandeur.

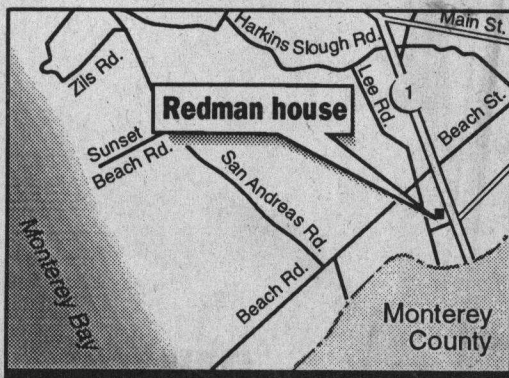
"It's our history and it's a wonderful old house. If somebody has some money to do something with it and restore it, it would be wonderful," said Marilyn McLachlan, president of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association.

A multimillion-dollar plan does exist for the 14-acre site on Lee Road between West Beach Road and Riverside Street, but proposed development to save the structure must first weather a slow bureaucratic process.

A 16-page colored booklet released a few years ago by developers and owners of the site shows impressive plans for the proposed Riverside Farm, an attraction that would feature the past and future of Pajaro Valley agriculture, and draw from the thousands of tourists who drive past the property each year.

The house, built for \$5,000 for the pioneer Redman family, is one of many such Victorian beauties built around the turn of the century. If plans go through, Lawlor said, developers intend to restore the building to its original splendor — an interior finish of eastern oak, birdseye maple and natural hard wood, detailed molding and beveled glass.

The dilapidated suffered severe structural damage in the 1989 earthquake. After the



Chris Carothers/Sentinel

quake, vandals stripped parts of the building's interior woodwork and tile, Lawlor said. Lawlor said the home could probably be renovated for \$400,000.

The plan includes an agricultural museum showing past and future farming methods, current agricultural events and activities for children. Renovated, the Redman House would become home to an upscale restaurant on the first floor. Lower-priced food would be offered in nearby kiosks, and retail shops would offer visitors a bevy of fresh produce, flowers and other farm products.

Crops would be grown in the remaining eight acres bordering the buildings. A demonstration garden would feature organic and traditional row crops, rotated to reflect the variety of crops grown in the valley.

Developer Ryland Kelley bought the property in 1985 after it had sat vacant for years. In 1988 the agriculture museum was proposed, but plans were stalled due to a lack of

money, said Owen Lawlor, project manager of the GreenFarm, which is developing the property with Riverside Farms; Kelley is a partner in both groups.

In 1991 Lawlor informally discussed the idea before county planners, but was told the county would not agree to developing prime farmland.

"The history of the county to convert agricultural land to non-agricultural land uses ... is that our policies are very strong against that. It just doesn't happen," said Mark Deming, senior county planner. Obtaining an amendment to the county's strict land use policy could be a lengthy and costly process and yield no results, Deming said.

But developers are hoping they'll have more luck if the property is annexed to the city of Watsonville.

To be included in Watsonville city limits, the property must first be approved as part of the city's general plan, still being finalized. Assuming the general plan is completed this year and the property is annexed, Lawlor said the \$5 million project could get off the ground in two years.

"We're encouraged, and there's a consensus that the site should be included within the city's jurisdiction. We don't think that there's much controversy," said Lawlor.

But Mayor Oscar Rios, who supports the plan, predicted that acquiring the property will be an uphill battle.

"Everything is controversial," said Rios, referring to the city's long battle to draw a map of future city limits in its general plan. "People will argue that nothing should be built on farm land."