

Barn renovation 'daunting but doable'



Tom David of Pan American Engineers gives an assessment of what the old Dairy Barn could become. Melinda Martinez/mmartinez@thetowntalk.com



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Assessment of Central Dairy Barn finds it structurally solid



(Photo: Melinda Martinez/mmartinez@thetowntalk.com)

The Central Dairy Barn is not in imminent danger of collapse.

That was one piece of news out of early assessments of the historic building on the grounds of Central State Hospital in Pineville.

The other was that it will take several million dollars to renovate the barn for use again. That doesn't deter Kendra Van Cleef, whose ["Save the Dairy Barn at Buhlow Lake" Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Save-the-Dairy-Barn-at-Buhlow-Lake/1527535524155059) (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Save-the-Dairy-Barn-at-Buhlow-Lake/1527535524155059>) has spurred new interest in the landmark, or others invested in the project.

"I knew the numbers were going to be big," Van Cleef said. "It doesn't scare me. We're going to make this happen."

"It's daunting, but it's very doable because of the commitment from a cross section of the community that has come together to support this," said Nathan Martin, a Pineville City councilman and member of the committee spearheading the Save the Barn effort. "You know what they say about how to eat an elephant — one bite at a time."

Representatives from Pan American Engineers, contractor Petron and Adams Pest Control toured the barn Thursday, looking for signs of deterioration in the 92-year-old structure. All donated their services.

After a morning of examining, poking and prodding, the verdict among the experts was that the barn is structurally sound, despite its age and weathered look.

"It's a good, solid building," said Tom David with Pan American Engineers. "If we can keep the water out, the structure can stand for a long time."

The biggest issue inspectors turned up was one wall of the barn is in danger of coming off. That wall does not impact the structure's stability, David said, but it could cost \$20,000 to repair if it does fall.

Other than that, inspectors found some roof rafters and other wood in need of replacing and signs of old termite activity, but nothing that can't be fixed at a reasonable cost. Going forward, David said some roof repairs will likely be needed to keep water from getting into the barn — the key to protecting it from deterioration.

He used the example of the old Paramount Theater in downtown Alexandria, which was the subject of renovation discussions when accumulated water caused the roof to collapse and the building to be lost in 1984.

"A lot of us are haunted by that," David said. "We thought, 'we should have payed closer attention, somebody should have seen it coming.' Hopefully, we're going to watch and protect this building so something like that doesn't happen again."

Built in 1923, the Dairy Barn is one of the most recognizable historic structures in the area. The dairy farm it served ceased operations in the 1950s, and the barn itself has not been used for any purpose for years.

Concerned about potential deterioration, Van Cleef started the Facebook page in November. It has drawn more than 8,300 "likes" and the interest of like-minded people who joined Van Cleef on the committee dedicated to preserving the barn.

The news that the barn is not in need of immediate major repairs gives the committee time to develop its future plans without worrying the building will fall in on itself.



Herbie Flynn (left), Joy Juderman, Mary Sonnier and Roger Corley look around the upstairs portion of the old Dairy Barn located on the grounds of Central Hospital in Pineville. (Photo: Melinda Martinez/mmartinez@thetowntalk.com)

Plans include soliciting donations to perform short-term repairs and possibly do some aesthetic exterior work and continuing discussions with the state about transferring or selling the barn to another public entity better equipped to restore it, a nonprofit or a private developer.

Central State Hospital is moving in the coming years to a new site, leaving hundreds of acres of property potentially open to redevelopment.

David said to renovate the Dairy Barn for use again would likely cost between \$3 million and \$5 million and take about two years to complete. Future uses that have been suggested include office space, meeting/event space or a restaurant.

"We would be naive to think this is a half-million dollar project," David said. "It isn't. You want to do it right so it lasts another 50 years."

"Our endgame has always been to save the barn before it deteriorates beyond repair," Martin said. "I love hearing them say the building is sound. We recognize that there are some areas where repairs are needed immediately, but it can be done. I pray this can be something our children and grandchildren can appreciate as a great landmark of Central Louisiana."

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