

'The perfect time' to save Central Dairy Barn



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Grassroots effort to save landmark drawing strong response



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

Have you ever crossed the Red River into Pineville, seen the old dairy barn overlooking Buhlow Lake and thought, "somebody should do something with that?"

Somebody has.

A Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Save-the-Dairy-Barn-at-Buhlow-Lake/1527535524155059>) started by a concerned citizen a month ago has generated enough momentum to boost hopes that the effects of time and neglect on the iconic Central Dairy Barn can be halted, and the historic property might someday be restored and reused.

"Surprised would be an understatement," said Kendra Van Cleef, who has seen the "Save the Dairy Barn at Buhlow Lake" page draw more than 7,200 "likes" since she started it on November 11. "I was shocked. I knew people cared about it, but I didn't know it was going to have the support it's had."

The barn — with its white exterior, red gambrel roof and double wings jutting off from the main loft — is one of the more recognizable historic structures still standing in the area. It's historic quality and majestic setting have inspired plenty of conversation of what it could be, if redeveloped in the right hands.

Unfortunately, the talk has been only that. And every year that passes without major renovations is a year closer to potentially losing the landmark.

In the 1990s, several of the beams supporting the roof were replaced and steel tension rods were installed horizontally throughout the main loft to stabilize the barn. In 2009, it was named by the Louisiana Trust for Historic Preservation as one of the 10 most endangered historic sites in the state.

While the barn is not in immediate danger of collapsing or being demolished, the elements continue to take a toll and the lack of a plan for its restoration and use has long been a source of concern for local preservationists.

Van Cleef, who has taken photos of the barn every year for several years, started the Facebook page after noticing the changes in her most recent photo from earlier ones.

That quickly turned into a seven-member committee. It's one and only mission — to protect the barn from further deterioration.

"We don't have an endgame as to what it should be," said committee member Nathan Martin, also a Pineville city councilman. "None of us have a personal agenda other than it being saved."

For now, committee members are trying to generate as much buzz as possible. They're asking anyone with an interest in the barn to visit the Facebook page, add to the likes total and share their own thoughts, memories, photos, etc.

Moving forward, they're hoping the momentum translates into a plan of action.

Tom David with Pan-American Engineers has offered his services to assess the structural condition of the barn and provide the group a better idea of the costs of protecting and restoring the property.

Committee members are exploring forming a nonprofit that would be able to receive donations dedicated to protecting and restoring the barn.

"We know it's going to be a \$1 million project," Van Cleef said. "I'm not scared by that."

Committee members have had ongoing dialogue with public stakeholders, including Central officials and the city of Pineville, and found them receptive. Funding has been approved for Central to move to a new facility adjacent to Pinecrest Supports and Services Center, which could open up hundreds of acres to private sector development.

"That will become some prime real estate for the most part, if handled correctly," said Pineville Mayor Clarence Fields.

Fields said "it's been a long time coming" for a private sector group to step up and make a push to save the barn. The Historical Association of Central Louisiana previously had discussions with the state about taking the property over, but had to pass since it lacked the resources to restore it.

HACL President Charles Charrier said the barn "probably has a greater number of people interested in it than the Hotel Bentley. As Alexandrians, of course, we love to see the Bentley being restored. But I think the Dairy Barn has an even broader appeal among the general populace of Rapides Parish for its restoration and preservation."

"The offers we've had of people willing to donate their professional expertise demonstrates how much this means to people," Martin said. "I think the passion is unanimous throughout the community. It's just the perfect time. The momentum is there."

Save the barn

Visit www.facebook.com/pages/Save-the-Dairy-Barn-at-Buhlow-Lake/1527535524155059 (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Save-the-Dairy-Barn-at-Buhlow-Lake/1527535524155059>) and "like" the page to show support for the effort to save the Dairy Barn. Share your ideas, memories, photos, etc.

Timeline

1923 — The Dairy Barn is built on the grounds of Central State Hospital in Pineville. It was designed by Joseph Carlin, an architect who previously had been treated at Central State Hospital.

1950s — Operations on the dairy farm cease when Buhlow lake was constructed on part of its pasture land.

1986 — The barn is added to the National Register of Historic Places

1990s — The loft of the barn is stabilized by replacing several beams supporting the roof and installing steel tension bars.

2009 — The Louisiana Trust for Historic Preservation names the barn one of the 10 most endangered historic sites in the state.

2012 — State officials announce plans to move Central State Hospital to a new facility across town.

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The dairy barn at Central La. State Hospital was among the historical sites on a tour hosted by the Central Louisiana State Cemetery Preservation Committee Wednesday, Oct. 18, 2012. The tour group was taken up to view the loft on the second floor of the barn.-Melinda Martinez/mmartinez@thetowntalk.commmartinez@thetowntalk.com (Photo: The Town Talk)

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