

UPDATE: Re-using HPL building would take 'mega-dollars'

6  **Richard Sharkey**, rsharkey@thetowntalk.com, (318) 487-6490 5:03 p.m. CDT August 24, 2015



(Photo: Richard Sharkey/The Town Talk)

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Support is strong for re-using the closed Huey P. Long Medical Center building in Pineville, but it would take "mega-dollars" to get it in shape to be fully repurposed.

Pineville Mayor Clarence Fields said it could take up to \$20 million to renovate the building for full re-use.

"True repurposing of the building is probably in the teens (of millions of dollars). It may be even as much as \$20 million," Fields said Monday while standing outside the 76-year-old hospital building.



Pineville Mayor Clarence Fields (right) talks to Rapides Parish Sheriff William Earl Hilton on Monday during a tour of the closed Huey P. Long Medical Center building in Pineville. They agree it would be very expensive to get the building in shape to re-use it. (Photo: Sheila Soileau White)

Fields, who was born in the hospital, was among about 35 people who toured the hospital building Monday morning. Most of those on the 45-minute tour were from the Historical Association of Central Louisiana.

A Town Talk reporter and other media representatives were not allowed to go on the tour, although they did talk to participants afterward in front of the building.

Rapides Parish Sheriff William Earl Hilton took the tour, and he agreed with Fields that the cost to bring the building back to life would be steep.

"I'm not an architect, but I can see that it's very, very run-down. It would take mega-dollars to bring it back up to where it could be used for anything," Hilton said.

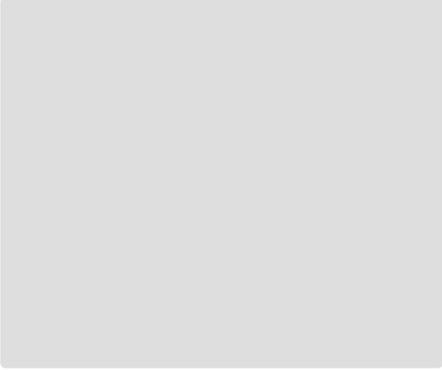
He said he had not been in the building for years before Monday's tour.

"It brought back a lot of old memories for me from years past from whenever I used to bring inmates and people over here. I'd like to see it recaptured and re-used, but who's to do it, I don't know," Hilton said.

"Money is going to be the key," Fields said. "The outside seemingly is in good shape. ... The inside is going to take a lot of work, a lot of dollars."

Touring the empty building was an emotional experience for Ina LaBorde of Pineville, a retired union representative who assisted hospital employees over the years.

"It was almost shocking to see how the building looks and how sad that we had to give this building up when it was so vibrant," LaBorde said.



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Ina LaBorde (Photo: Richard Sharkey/The Town Talk)

"It was very moving to walk through, and sad. ...Just the emptiness of the entire building is what was so moving to me. And having been in and out of this hospital since I was a little girl, and I had family born here and had family members die here," she said, her voice trailing off.

The state has maintained the building the best it could since it closed, she said, "and we didn't see any major damage" during the tour.

LaBorde said she was glad to get to see the brass doors that formerly were at the front of the building. Those doors are now leaning up against a wall in the old emergency room, she said.



This is one of the hallways in the Huey P. Long Medical Center building, as seen on a tour Monday. (Photo: Sheila Soileau White)

Fields said it was good that the tour gave the Historical Association members a chance to get an up-close look at the building.

"The city, we look for any help that we can get as far as putting something back into commerce here," Fields said.

He made it clear that the city of Pineville cannot afford to take on the responsibility of ownership.

"We're hoping somebody else will, whether it be a public-private venture or something like that and make something happen, but as far as the city going it alone, that's impossible," Fields said.



This was among the areas of Huey P. Long Medical Center that was seen by a group touring the closed hospital on Monday. (Photo: Sheila Soileau White)

The building's infrastructure, such as the air conditioning system, wiring and elevators, needs major work, he said.



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A hospital official said the air conditioner is being run regularly to try to prevent mold and mildew.

Helen Moore, who formerly worked at the hospital and who has been involved in the preservation effort, said there was no mold or mildew seen on the tour.

"I found the building to be remarkably clean," she said.



Those taking a tour of the closed Huey P. Long Medical Center in Pineville on Monday talk about the building. Many of those on the tour were members of the Historical Association of Central Louisiana. (Photo: Sheila Soileau White)

Charles Charrier, who is president of the Historical Association of Central Louisiana, said the building itself is stable.

"Re-usability is a big question, but I am very encouraged by the different people who showed up today" for the tour to see what the possibilities are, Charrier said.

He said one possible use for the building would be for a "collage of nonprofit agencies."

Jamie Floyd, a former Rapides Parish police juror who is president of the board of the Rapides Council on Aging, said that organization would consider moving to the building if it became a home for a variety of nonprofit agencies.

Pineville city officials have taken some representatives of companies on tours of the building, but nothing has become of that, with some of those representatives citing the high costs that would be involved in renovation.

The building is owned by the state, which has not announced any plans for it.

The hospital's last day of operation was June 30, 2014. It was closed as part of the state's revamping of the charity hospital system.

The building was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places in a process funded by the Historical Association of Central Louisiana.

That makes it eligible for state and federal tax breaks that supporters hope will lead to re-use of the building.

Concerning the building's future, Mayor Fields said, "Honestly, I don't know what the next step is. ... We'll be researching what the steps are now moving forward."



Huey P. Long Medical Center in Pineville has been closed since June 30, 2014. (Photo: Richard Sharkey/The Town Talk)

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