

Is Davis Auditorium's era bygone? Group hopes not

Fundraising drive continues to save facility, which has been closed for three years

BY CARL BURNETT JR. • THE EAGLE-GAZETTE STAFF • AUGUST 4, 2010

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LANCASTER -- Davis Auditorium is silent this summer. The shutters are closed. The lights are off. Scaffolds in the auditorium are the silent reminders things are not what they used to be.

People in the 2,500-seat auditorium located in the middle of the Lancaster Campground, 2151 W. Fair Ave., have heard the booming voices of historical figures like William Jennings Bryan, Billy Sunday and President William McKinley, as well as musical groups like the Brass Band of Columbus throughout the past century.

But those voices have been silent since 2007, when the auditorium was closed for safety reasons.

The Lancaster Campground Meeting and Church Assembly Association started a fundraising drive to preserve the building three years ago, said Mike Schleppe, fundraising chairman for the building.

"It's a liability issue more than a safety one," Schleppe said. "We've been told by inspectors if we get the electric wiring replaced and install lighted exit signs, we could start using the facility again. But there is a lot more work on it that is needed."

So far organizers have been able to raise almost \$80,000 of the estimated \$600,000 needed to preserve the building. The association has already used approximately \$180,000 to preserve the building, Schleppe said.

"We need a lot more money to begin the needed repairs and start using the building again," Schleppe said.

The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The building was constructed in 1895 and was designed by a Pennsylvania railroad bridge engineer who used a wooden trussed bridge design to support the building's roof, said the Rev. Earl Bishop, one of the association members who serves on the fundraising committee.

The Davis Auditorium is the central focal point of the campground, which is a Christian retreat center originally started in 1878 as a Methodist meeting place.

Today the campground has about 400 people living in 238 cottages, with 160 being full-time residences, said Greg White, manager of the Lancaster Campground.

The auditorium sits in the middle of the development with all the central roads leading to it, like the spokes of a wheel.

Back in 2007 the association set up a fund with the Fairfield County Foundation for people who want to make tax-deductible contributions.

But because of the recession, Schleppe said the revenue raised to preserve the building hasn't been as high as the association had hoped.

But the association hasn't given up hope. On Saturday the group reaffirmed its support to preserve the building for the future.

"As we receive money we will start using it to fix the building in stages," Schleppe said.

Repairs have been made through the decades. The roof has been replaced a couple of times, and the foundation has been raised and shored up after it sank approximately 5 1/2 inches in one corner.

Schleppe said three engineers who looked at the structure said it is solid.

"If we preserve it the people will come. They will use it. It would be open to the public for people to use," Schleppe said. "But we need the public's help. With their help, we can bring it back and keep it going for another hundred years."

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The Rev. Earl Bishop, left, and Mike Schleppe stand inside the Davis Auditorium on Tuesday at the Lancaster Campground. Both men are part of fundraising efforts to preserve the historic building. (Rob Hardin, Eagle-Gazette)

WANT TO HELP PRESERVE DAVIS AUDITORIUM?

Tax-deductible donations can be sent to the Davis Auditorium Fund, c/o Fairfield County Foundation, 162 E. Main St., Lancaster, OH 43130.