

## Historic Schoolhouse Spared

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By Emory Williamson, intern

Following wind and ice storms in the past year, Kathy Hockersmith found her aging barn on the verge of a collapse. Determined to keep the barn, Hockersmith worked tirelessly to repair it.

“It should have been on the ground,” Hockersmith said, due to the severe damage the barn endured during the storms. “But it has withstood all the tests that nature has given it and it’s destined to be something great.”



That same mentality has led her – along with the non-profit Friends of Westport – to raise money and awareness for the renovation of Westport Schoolhouse into a community center for the small river town in northern Oldham County.

Abandoned since the mid-1980s, the deteriorating building has undergone significant restoration – including the construction of a new, \$27,000 building foundation. FOW plans to develop the facility into a community center housing a museum, city artifacts and a small library.

Constructed in 1882, the one-room schoolhouse held classes for grades one through eight until the 1950s. Since then, the building has been the site of homemakers club meetings, volunteer fire department meetings and countless fish fries, reunions and wedding receptions for the community.

The Westport Volunteer Fire Department rented the building until 2005, when some members wanted to tear it down.

Hockersmith and the FOW stepped in to stifle demolition of the building, and an arduous battle ensued to save the building.

The deal eventually settled when the fire department and Hockersmith’s brother agreed to a property trade.

Although Hockersmith said heated battles about the future of the schoolhouse have passed, the new battle of fundraising begins.

FOW still needs \$150,000 for renovations – including a new roof, windows, gutters, insulation, drywall, electrical plumbing and kitchen repairs. Hockersmith said the goal is to have the facility fully renovated by fall 2010.

The next phase of renovation will be to complete electrical, plumbing and HVAC repairs, followed with installing a new roof. Hockersmith contracts some of the work, but most projects require volunteers and donations from local businesses.

FOW members Laurel Rausch and Patty Webb said they have hosted numerous fundraising events throughout the past few years. However, events such as pie auctions and grants obtained by Hockersmith still leave the group scraping for funding.

“All that’s stopping us is the money,” Webb said. “That’s what we need because we’re ready to go.”

Rausch said that even during uncertain economic times, volunteers and community members have provided ample help. Yet, one deterring factor is the limited support and charitable funding from Oldham County Fiscal Court and others involved in local

government.

“We don’t know why we haven’t had as much support from local governments,” Hockersmith said, adding that there was some confusion as to the non-profit association of FOW. “They don’t have the vision, but we have come this far and it looks really good. This can be done and this is something that is very viable. We can restore it.”

Nearby residents such as Gene Kelley and his wife, Vinney, said the renovation of the former schoolhouse would revitalize the community.

Kelley recalls fish fries, festivals and herds of people laughing and playing near the building – located less than 100 yards from his front porch on the corner of Fourth and Court Street. Kelley remembers days spent playing baseball in the front yard of the schoolhouse and celebrating his daughter’s wedding at the building several years later.

“It’s been a long, long time,” Kelley said, who has lived on the street nearing 75 years. “(The schoolhouse) is sentimental to me. It’s a landmark.”

Yet even with struggles of renovating the building and accumulating funding, FOW is working against time as well. Diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in January, Hockersmith said she looks forward to seeing the restoration complete.

“Sometimes you don’t have two years and my goal is to have that place open and for people to use it like they used to before anything happens,” Hockersmith said.

Rausch and Webb understand the limitations and credit Hockersmith for her commitment to the renovation.

“(Hockersmith) wants to save an historic building in an historic location in an historic town, but she wants to provide the community with this gathering place where the community could come together,” Rausch said. “She doesn’t want to see it for herself. She wants to give it to the community.”

The schoolhouse not only served as a place to host festivals, celebrations and get-togethers, but as a safe haven in times of struggle as well. During the recent wind and ice storms, as well as times of flooding, the facility has supported families who needed a place to stay or store some of their belongings.

“Even as shabby as it looks, people love that building,” Webb said. “It’s the heartbeat of this town.”

Hockersmith said that the town – once a hotbed for transportation – is in need of the community center in order to boost tourism and complement the history of the city, while serving as a local place to gather. She believes the community center will also help younger generations value the historical significance of the town and the schoolhouse.

“If you bring education and history to life for these kids it leaves a far greater impression on them,” she said. “I want this community to be here for future generations and my kids’ kids to know about places like this.”

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