

High Priority

City erects safety fence around crumbling water tower

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(Enlarge) The 148-foot Roland Water Tower, at University Parkway and Roland Avenue, built in 1904-05, is falling apart, and the city last week took the precaution of erecting a barbed-wire fence around it. Efforts are under way to repair the tower, which could cost up to \$1 million. (Staff photo by Drew Anthony Smith)

condition of the tower.

"I'd just like the whole city to care about it," Frasier said.

The group in its mission statement states it is "committed to restoring the tower to a state of engineering stability and aesthetic beauty, as well as exploring strategies to foster stewardship for the tower and surrounding green space for future generations."

The group also says the tower has great historical and architectural value, offers a panoramic view of the city and is at the gateway of Cross Keys, Evergreen, Hampden, Hoes Heights, Keswick, Medfield, Roland Park and Wyndhurst.

Raising money to preserve the tower, an official city historic landmark, has been one of the civic league's priorities, even though the tower stands just south of the Roland Park boundary, in Hoes Heights.

Last year, however, the tower took a back seat to the renovation of the aging Roland Park fire station and the battle to stop development of a retirement community off Falls Road.

Now, efforts to save the tower have new life. Frasier, assistant professor of architecture at Morgan State University, co-founded the Friends group, which plans to seek nonprofit status so it can raise money to repair the tower -- a project league officials say would cost \$750,000 to \$1 million.

"We see this as a three- to five-year commitment," Frasier said.

The other members are Michael Falk, of Roland, an associate professor of engineering at Johns Hopkins University; Ken Winkler, of Roland Park, who is on the league's board, and Hoes Heights resident Matthew Fitzsimmons, a planner and architect, who said he has found pieces of the tower's terra cotta top in his

Suzanne Frasier can see the old Roland Water Tower from 12 of the 20 windows in her house on Evans Chapel Road. She can also see that the 105-year-old tower is crumbling before her eyes.

"At the end of every winter I can measure the damage with my binoculars," Frasier told the Roland Park Civic League on July 2.

The league is taking notice of the damage, too -- and so is Baltimore City, which still owns the tower.

Acting on complaints that chunks of the tower were falling down, the city last week erected a barbed-wire fence around the octagonal, 148-foot-tall tower, located at University Parkway and Roland Avenue.

And Frasier co-founded Friends of the Roland Water Tower, whose four members will be stationed outside the fence on Thursdays in July from 5:30 to 7 p.m., to raise not money but awareness about the

yard.

The league board last week voted to support the Friends group's effort. Both groups are enlisting the support of nearby communities, including Hampden, Rolden, Medfield, Hoes Heights and Roland Heights.

Falk said all area communities should be involved because, "It's a structure that sits in several communities."

Frasier, a non-practicing architect, said the brick shaft of the tower is in good shape, but the top is deteriorating.

Contributing to the belvedere's decay is a 6-foot pile of pigeon droppings, she said.

Frasier isn't worried that the tower will topple, but she said, "Every winter that it isn't fixed, it's more expensive to fix."

How much money Roland Park alone can raise is uncertain. The league spent much of the past year fighting plans by Keswick Multi-Care Center to build a retirement facility on 17 acres of Baltimore Country Club green space. Keswick has dropped those plans, and the league now is trying to buy the land from the club to preserve it.

The community is still raising money to renovate the aging firehouse. Raffle tickets to benefit the station were sold at the end of the Roland Park parade route on July 4.

League board member Louise McSherry said 40th District State Del. Catherine Pugh told her a bond bill to fix the tower wouldn't stand much chance of passing the legislature because not enough residents in the district would benefit from the tower.

McSherry suggested that Frasier and her group might have more luck getting a bond bill of up to \$100,000 if they can come up with a popular repurposing of the tower.

Board members said it makes more sense to shore up the tower as part of renovations for a specific use, rather than fixing it now and having to spend more money when the renovations begin.

In recent years, league officials have tried to buy the tower from the city for as little as \$1, because the city, which built the water tower in 1904-1905 to serve Hampden and neighborhoods to the south, hasn't used it since since the advent of the reservoir system in 1930.

The league originally wanted to use the tower as a museum of local history and as a league headquarters.

The city's real estate division has appraised the tower as having no value, paving the way for a possible sale. But league officials now say the tower's interior is too narrow, and that the tower might be more marketable as a repository for cell phone antennae, for example.

Frazier appreciates Roland Park's support but stressed that she doesn't want to have to rely on Roland Park.

"It's our cause," she said. "We want Roland Park to play a role, but they can't be the solution."

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