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Bonsack, Hotel, Park, Trees are “Endangered” 2007

The village of Bonsack, Buena Vista and Villa Heights recreation centers, Hotel Patrick Henry, Elmwood Park and the valley’s tree canopy are placed on the 2007 Endangered Sites listing of the Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation. They were announced Thursday at the foundation’s annual meeting.

This is the 11th year the preservation organization has selected threatened historic sites and buildings, cultural and environmental features to increase recognition of significant endangered resources. The listing calls public attention to the threats and encourages their preservation and stewardship.

At Bonsack, a Georgia company has applied for commercial zoning of 7.5 acres of residential property fronting on Glade Creek and Bonsack Road, less than 100 yards east of Deedie Kagey’s 1836 home, one of the oldest in Roanoke County. The proposal to build a pharmacy, fast food restaurant and other commercial structures “would obliterate the community,” said Kagey, principal of the nearby Bonsack Elementary School and author of *A History of Roanoke County*. Development of the Cook property would take several homes and a barn. The proposal is held up by regulations of Army Engineers and Flood Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) pertaining to heavy drainage from WalMart and Lowe’s stores across U.S. 460 from the site.

Buena Vista, a mansion in Jackson Park, SE, and the Villa Heights Recreation Center, are endangered because the City of Roanoke has offered them for sale without any protective covenants. The Preservation Foundation urges the City to place protective easements on the old structures. Buena Vista, a brick, Greek Revival home of Col. George Tayloe, a prominent 19th century plantation owner, was built about 1850 and was sold to the city in 1937. It is listed on the state and national landmarks registers. The Roanoke Preservation office of Virginia Department of Historic Resources has operated there for almost 20 (?) years. The Villa Heights center, also known as the Compton-Bateman House, is on land once owned by William McClanahan. The home was owned by Abraham Murray and Col. Maurice Langhorne. Both buildings were originally placed on the Endangered Sites list in 1999 for neglect because of lack of funding.

The owner of Hotel Patrick Henry, a Colonial Revival structure built in 1925 and listed on the state and national landmarks registers, recently lost a court attempt to remain open because of inadequate fire protection. Its future is uncertain because the New York owner has plans prepared for conversion to senior apartments but the building was closed by city officials when fire sprinklers were not updated and other requirements were not met. The hotel had been open only for special events for some time. The hotel was extensively remodeled and converted to apartments in 1972.

Elmwood Park, a central feature of downtown Roanoke since 1911, has been selected by three Roanoke City Council members as the site for a proposed amphitheater. Also, downtown business people have called for a location in or near the downtown area. The space requirement coupled with a need for parking would take a large portion of the municipal park. Located on a royal land grant to Thomas Tosh, one of the first settlers in the valley, the park area was the seat of a plantation owned by Benjamin Tinsley and later Peyton Terry, downtown entrepreneur.

After the city bought the house and grounds in 1911, a Tosh home on the hill was the location of Roanoke's first library in 1921. A new library was built in 1957. The park once was proposed as a site for a municipal building and later a civic center. Chautauqua events and other celebrations have been held there through the years.

Trees and tree canopy in the Roanoke Valley need to be evaluated, maintained, protected and preserved and planting for development and replacement should have a planned approach. The existing canopy is not protected by legal means to avoid v-cutting or other unsightly cutting. Although utilities have an easement to do what is necessary to keep trees off their lines, a city spokesperson said that zoning ordinances require that future wiring or cable be underground. Poor tree planting and maintenance are evident throughout the valley, for example, trees have been trimmed on Apperson Drive in Salem. Tree preservation ordinances would go a long way toward maintaining healthy tree growth.

With this Endangered Sites announcement, the Foundation seeks to raise awareness of the importance of the sites and their threatened status. The organization wants to work with property owners and local governments to explore options to promote preservation. The Foundation tries to be a source for positive action, not just a reactionary critic. The best success would be to take a property from the endangered list and celebrate its preservation with an award during Preservation Week in May.

Of the seven endangered sites selected by the Preservation Foundation last year, only one has been removed. In the 400 block of Gilmer Ave., NW, a foundation has purchased the boyhood home of civil rights leader Oliver Hill and plans are under way for a use for the building.

Other 2006 sites still endangered are the Rt. 220 corridor south of Roanoke; a house at 806 Marshall Ave., SW, under threat of demolition by the city; landscape fabric, cobblestone streets, stone walls and the Mill Mountain gatehouse; a proposed railway inland port location in Montgomery County; two log structures in Greenfield Industrial Park, former William Preston plantation in Botetourt County, and the Rt. 122 corridor between Burnt Chimney and Rt. 24 in Bedford County.

The main speaker at the meeting at the Link Museum was Bill Chapman, a Richmond developer, who talked about adaptive reuse of historic buildings.

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