

# Losing a landmark



Andy Ouriel, Sandusky Register 2-5-2021

VERMILION - For years, the question crossed the minds of countless community members. Should the city government preserve or pulverize a storied waterfront structure?

Well, earlier this week, elected officeholders provided a definitive answer to this years-old query. Vermilion's city council on Monday approved and finalized demolition orders to raze the Wakefield Mansion, sitting atop the

former Inland Seas Maritime Museum property, on North Main Street. It's located beside Vermilion's lighthouse, overlooking Main Street Beach on Lake Erie.

Despite its local landmark status, this building has sat vacant for almost a decade. Prior to when Vermilion acquired the property, in 2014, the building had deteriorated and remains in a blighted condition.

Officials opted against restoring the property. They cited excessive costs - officials estimate they need \$4 million, money not presently available in a cash-strapped budget, to resurrect the space along with an additional \$50,000 committed each year thereafter for regular upkeep - paired with no logical tenant coming forward for a practical use.

But council members and Mayor Jim Forthofer believe the public can get more, and better, use of this lakefront land through an initiative called the Main Street Beach revitalization project.

First proposed in 2019, a \$2 million plan requires the mansion's demise to free up real estate for a full-scale transformation. The mansion abuts Main Street Beach.

## Blueprints show crews:

- Expanding the parking area
- Building a traffic circle, or center island, so motorists can more easily drop off their passengers or turn around to navigate through this cramped space, a dead-end street
- Constructing restrooms and changing shelters
- Establishing enough room for open-air amenities, namely an amphitheater, pavilion, additional green space and walkways

Forthofer explained his passion behind the proposal. "Vermilion, by its origins, is a lakefront-river community, and it attracts a lot of people because of its history," he said. "And, as such, it deserves to have a first-class beach on the lakefront, and that is what this project is aiming toward. We want to give the visitors and residents assured access to the lakefront through an expanded Main Street Beach with first-rate facilities."

## Making sense of the dollars and cents

Many residents want to know why the building can't be salvaged and turned into, say, a restaurant or another museum.

In 2014, when Vermilion's government acquired the former Inland Seas Maritime Museum building, it did so by raising \$1.6 million with donations and grant dollars. "Some of the grants we used to acquire the property had commercial restrictions," Forthofer said. "We can't use that property for commercial purposes."

While people might scoff at the beach project's \$2 million price point, Forthofer noted:

- It's still half the amount compared to resurrecting the mansion, \$4 million.
- The city can seek out and acquire grants to offset the beach project, which can't be done with mansion-related work.

If the beach project comes under budget, Forthofer vowed to spend leftover funds on other pressing tasks. "The city has residential streets in horrible shape, a wastewater plant that may need to be completely rebuilt, a police department operating out of an old convenience store building and the possible need for a new municipal pool or senior center," Forthofer said. "In good conscience, as mayor, I cannot commit \$3 million to \$4 million of the taxpayer's money and \$50,000-plus per year to a single structure that does not generate anything more for the taxpayers than nostalgia."

### **For the demolition**

Direct descendants of Frederick Wakefield, the man who built and occupied his mansion's namesake, understand why his former home must come crashing down. Here's a letter jointly written by Read Wakefield, Ted Wakefield, Margaret Wakefield Worcester and Deborah Wakefield O'Hara:

We, the four Vermilion grandchildren of Commodore Frederick W. Wakefield, are saddened at the need to demolish the museum, the home built by him in the early 1900s.

Although we would rather that there could be a solution other than removing the home he called Harbor View, we recognize that this is just an impossibility. Each of us has important lasting memories, paintings and photographs from when our grandmother lived there and as the Inland Seas Maritime Museum.

The city worked to purchase the land for the benefit of our community (a few) years ago. It was a tremendous achievement and a leap of faith. Since then, they have worked diligently to come up with a plan for the structure, but no viable option exists. The cost to restore and maintain the building is prohibitive. Practicality must prevail over bravado and passion.

Most importantly, future developments must be sustainable for the community. The restrictions upon the land make it even more challenging to achieve sustainability.

We have been delighted to see the growing and active usage of Main Street Beach and the waters during the day and, especially, for our sunsets.

There is no other beach park quite as spectacular as this parcel of land. We think our grandfather would be pleased that now it is time for the citizens of Vermilion to share and enjoy its public spaces and grand views.

### **Against the demolition**

Julie Rohl, a spokeswoman with Preservation Ohio, which advocates for and offers services to safeguard Ohio's historic properties, wholeheartedly disagrees with the decision.

She provided a statement on the situation:

Preservation Ohio became aware of the situation in Vermilion through several news articles detailing the efforts of the concerned citizens' group to mobilize and encourage the restoration and return to use of the National Register-listed Harbor View Mansion and Maritime Museum, also known as the Wakefield Mansion.

Based on our impressions of the Harbor View Mansion and museum space and knowledge of the restrictions in the conservation easement, Preservation Ohio had worked with a local advocacy group, the Concerned Citizens, to hone usage ideas.

We had hoped to discuss those ideas with the city of Vermilion and work together to identify the best paths to solving the obstacles which threatened the building. At the very least, it would have been wonderful if the restoration of the main house, also known as the Wakefield Mansion, could have been prioritized.

Most projects are feasible with the right amount of support, engaged partners and effort. Harbor View is certainly far from the most dilapidated building Preservation Ohio has seen returned to productive community enjoyment. At the absolute very least, an agreement sparing

the original home could be achieved, although we feel some of the greatest potential for income production exists in keeping the addition.

The loss of this landmark will likely be felt more acutely once the land is cleared and all that remains are interpretive nods and signage.

#### **Timeline of city-related events involving the Wakefield Mansion**

- 2013: Vermilion's government raised \$1.6 million to purchase about 2 acres of lakefront land from the Inland Seas Museum Group. The Wakefield Mansion sits on this property. A fundraising campaign occurred to preserve the overall lakefront property.

- 2014: Vermilion acquires the property.

- 2014 and 2015: City officials formed committees to determine what could be done with the Wakefield Mansion. A Kent-based architectural firm, through a study, determined the mansion would need up to \$4 million to restore the structure and an additional \$50,000 a year for upkeep.

- 2015: The committees, in conjunction with Vermilion's parks and recreation board, agreed this restoration work "was cost-prohibitive." Officials proposed demolishing the old Wakefield Mansion to make way for a transformed Main Street Beach property.

- 2017: Public hearings took place to receive feedback for possible demolition work. The meetings were sparsely attended with only a few objections raised.

- 2019: Officials sought funding to demolish the mansion, in part, to transform the beach and area greenspace.

- 2019 and 2020: People and groups proposed ideas to save and/or repurpose the mansion. The mayor wanted these parties to present a "credible financial plan" with any proposal. To date, he has "not received one financial plan."

- 2020: Officials presented plans for the entire Main Street Beach revitalization project, which called for demolishing the mansion.

- January 2021: Council members approved a resolution for the beach project.

- February 2021: Bids solicited for demolition contractors.

- March 1: Bid accepted for demolition work, \$87,500, and approved by council.

Demolition work to start in the coming days/weeks.

- May 28: All demolition work scheduled to end.

Source: Vermilion's mayor office