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Ice House Museum, Island Park Boat House still awaiting restoration

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Brandon Pollock Artifacts such as this Gene Lehman diorama of downtown Cedar Falls are still in storage awaiting the reconstruction of the Ice House Museum in Cedar Falls which was damaged in the June 2008 flood. (BRANDON POLLOCK / Courier Staff Photographer)

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CEDAR FALLS - The city's history starts with the Cedar River.

Two years ago, the same river nearly destroyed a significant chunk of that history.

The Ice House Museum took on nearly 5 feet of water during record flooding in June 2008. Across the river, the Island Park Beach House sustained heavy damage. Walls caved in and washed downstream, and the roof buckled.

William Sturgis first settled along the banks of the Cedar River near present-day downtown Cedar Falls. He planned to use its energy to power a mill.

Not surprisingly, a prime focus for history buffs has been the river and how people have used it over the years. But with the high water two years ago, the river threatened to reclaim its flood plain.

The Ice House holds the greater historical value and is the most popular of the Cedar Falls Historical Society's five museums. The building dates to 1921, rebuilt at that time after a fire destroyed a previous ice house that dated to 1858 on the same site.

When the flood came, waterlogged displays and artifacts floated inside the signature round building.

"It was emotionally and physically devastating," said Jeff Kurtz, the historical society's executive director. "People invested an incredible amount of time and energy into what was there. We had people down there tearing apart what they had built themselves."

Volunteers worked for a month to clear items from the Ice House, cleaning and salvaging as many items as they could. Then came the process of determining how to make sure another flood doesn't cause as much damage.

The historical society hired a consulting firm, Split Rock Studios, to help plan for the future. Split Rock was

previously involved with designing the Grout Museum expansion in Waterloo.

While hand-crafted displays on the main floor were destroyed, most of the relics were saved.

"The real artifact was the structure, and the structure survived," Kurtz said. "We were thoughtful and aware we didn't want this to ever happen again."

Estimates suggest rebuilding the museum will cost \$727,000. So far, the historical society is about \$100,000 short of that goal.

The biggest chunk of funding comes from a \$545,700 state I-Jobs grant. The remainder is from other grants and \$45,000 in private donations.

The first phase of reconstruction will also be the most expensive. Plans call for elevating the floor above the 2008 flood level. That means a house moving company will raise it more than 5 feet. At the same time, the balcony area will also be lifted and tilted, in part to accommodate a ramp that will go from the entrance to the higher first floor.

In addition to the physical changes will come philosophical ones.

"We were fortunate to have an opportunity to rethink what the Ice House is about," Kurtz said.

The new design will be simpler, with fewer items on the first floor. The museum will also intensify its emphasis on the Cedar River, ice harvesting and people's memories of the Ice House.

"We didn't want to just build an exact replica of what it was before," Kurtz said.

The first phase of reconstruction could start in February. The historical society expects to have initial phases completed in 2010.

Landmark

The future of the Beach House is less clear.

The Beach House has been a fixture on the Cedar Falls riverfront since the early 1920s. It started as a major gathering place, with swimmers by the hundreds coming to take a dip in the river. Its function changed over the years, though, the structure has been a rental hall and home to the North Shore Boat Club for years.

In addition, the structure itself has had major changes. Those alterations played a role in a failed attempt to place the Beach House on the National Register of Historic Places.

The North Shore Boat Club, which operates the facility in cooperation with the city's park and recreation

department, has been raising money for the rebuilding effort. So far, though, funds are short of what is needed.

The city received permission to rebuild the structure, which lies in the floodway, the classification most prone to high water. Plans under review by the city Park and Recreation Committee would elevate the first floor 11 feet above grade.

But the thought of rebuilding at the same site hasn't generated universal support, though the boat club and North Cedar Neighborhood Association favor the idea.

Planners took great pains to flood-proof the building, raising it above the 500-year flood level. Concepts also call for columns based on those from the original structure on the building's river side.

"(Architect) Dan Levi gave a nod to the old design," said Dick Dobson of the SaveTheBeachHouse.org, a private group working to rebuild the structure. "He did a great job."

While the columns would harken back to the original building, the interior will also remind people of the Beach House of more recent times.

"It's a no-frills building. It's a big open space inside," Dobson said.

The project needs to work its way through the park commission, planning and zoning commission and City Council for approval before it can go to financing reconstruction. A ballpark estimate puts the cost at \$800,000, but the figure depends on when it can be built.

A Federal Emergency Management Agency grant will cover \$280,000, and a state grant will account for another \$50,000. A fundraising campaign is under way to generate another \$50,000.

"In all honesty, we probably only have a third of that structure funded," said Mark Ripplinger, city parks manager. "We have work to do in applying for grants."

Ripplinger said the earliest construction could begin is this fall.

The 2008 floods, in addition to tornadoes that year, affected communities across Iowa. Historical sites and museums were lost and others are still struggling to recover, just like the Ice House and Beach House.

Cyndi Sweet, director of the Iowa Museum Association, said one of the major problems has been trying to gain disaster relief money and grants to rebuild. While museums are well-accustomed to searching for grant money, the disasters required investigating new sources.

"The museums have worked very hard to raise funds for recovery and rebuilding of both infrastructure and exhibits," Sweet said.

Since 2008, the museum association and other historical groups received a grant to begin developing a statewide disaster plan. The idea is to be better prepared to protect and recover collections in the future.

Along the banks of the Cedar River, that planning is also moving forward.

"With anything like this we look at it as an opportunity to make it better and less susceptible to flooding in the future," Ripplinger said.

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