



July 26, 2007

Progress being made on Ambassador House

By John Tuohy

john.tuohy@indystar.com

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The historic but long-shuttered Ambassador House is springing back to life.

Workers have begun gutting and restoring the 176-year-old, 2 1/2--story wood home, thanks to \$823,000 from the Town Council.

MD Rowe Construction of Indianapolis was hired to do the outside and inside renovation, including walls and windows. It should be completed by the end of the year.

"They'll deliver to us a 'white box,' a house that is bare inside and ready for us to decorate and fill up," said Pam Newell, executive director of the Historic Ambassador House and Heritage Gardens.

The house, in Heritage Park at 106th Street and Eller Road, will become a Fishers history museum, with enough space to host weddings and special events.

But the house is only part of the property's overhaul.

Officials also are planning a 1 1/2-acre walking garden, with foot paths to roses, wildflowers, grapes, an orchard and vegetables. The Victorian-era nursery will feature white picket fences with stone posts and a large public space to accommodate up to 500 people for events.

The garden will cost about \$200,000. The money is in the parks budget, but the Town Council has not hired a company to do the work.

Newell hopes both home and garden are ready to open by spring.

"It will really be a piece of history. Everything will reflect the era."

The house once belonged to Indianapolis lawyer Addison Harris, a congressman and state senator who was appointed U.S. minister, or ambassador, to the Austro-Hungarian Empire by President William McKinley in 1899.

After Harris died in 1916, his wife, India, cared for the house until her death in 1948, when it was donated to Indiana University.

IU sold off the property a little at a time, and eventually a developer planned to demolish the house.

In 1996, the Town Council and local preservationists stepped in and moved the house from its original location at 96th Street and Allisonville Road to its new site, about three miles away. The house has remained closed since, though scattershot improvements have been made.

Council President Scott Faultless was in his first year on the job when the house was moved.

"We recognized that this was a historical structure and that there weren't many in Fishers, so we better save it," he said. "We want to preserve, somewhere, some semblance of the town's history."

Newell said her organization tried to raise money for improvements, but that cash was quickly drained just trying to maintain the building.

Faultless said the council decided to take charge again.

"We just said, 'Let's get this done.' " Faultless said. "And realistically, if you built a new building that would do all that this will do, it would probably cost more."

Newell said the house was the Harrises' summer home. Addison and India, who was one of the founders of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, lived on North Meridian Street and took a horse and buggy out to the home in the warm months.

"It was real nice -- out in the country and on the river," Newell said.

Preservationists hope to convince the IMA to donate some of India's belongings -- including dresses, a tea set, a textile collection and a portrait of her.