

Reeder's Alley structural problems unclear; cost, scope of work unknown



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INDEPENDENT RECORD

Reeder's Alley is headed for significant structural repairs, but the scope and cost of the fixes remain unclear.

A structural engineer's report on the largest of the historic structures off the south end of Park Avenue in Helena identifies significant problems with settlement due to water infiltration from the hillside to the west of the structure undercutting the foundation.

But the report from Stahly Engineering in Helena also says engineers will not know the extent of the damage — and necessary repairs — until the work begins.

“Construction of repairs to the structure will require extensive in-site oversight by the engineer to verify that all the assumptions that are made are correct,” the report to the site's owner, Montana Heritage Commission, says.

“The most cost effective way to handle unknown situations that may arise during repair is to have an initial approach and then reassess it after it is opened up.”

All the businesses in the area remain open, despite the closure of the long, modern-era wooden stairway whose 35 steep steps lead to Papa Tony's.

Patrons there are guided by signs around the building to the entrance, and owner Kathy Prendergast says the new route is actually easier than the steep stairs, and diners are finding the restaurant.

Elijah Allen, business and operations manager for the commission, said he's requested bids from contractors and expects them by mid-November, but the costs of the project could range from \$50,000 to \$250,000.

And how to pay for it all isn't clear.

“It just seems like there a lot of unanswered questions,” he said this week. “Until I get those bids back from the contractors, I can't apply for grants.”

Reeder's Alley, built in the 1870s, is the oldest intact piece of early Helena, according to the commission. It was donated to the state in 2000, and now houses various businesses and organizations and a couple of restaurants in structures whose exteriors, at least, have changed very little.

But the engineering report identifies serious problems that the commission says threaten the safety of the large building at the back, or west, end of the complex, flush against a hillside.

Water is seeping under parts of the top floor of the structure, displacing material as it flows east, leaving a void under a concrete walkway and a portion of the floor, according to the engineering report.

That water has to be removed from the equation by coming up with a better drainage system, the report says. Then, some foundation work will be required to stabilize the building.

The engineering report offers more details of work to be done. The easternmost foundation wall of the structure, parallel to the stairway, is crumbling from the water infiltration. The engineers propose to “re-point and reset” cobbles.

The southern wall will require some shoring up, along with installation of a new, fully buried concrete wall, the report says.

The process will probably not begin until spring, Allen said, and the Montana Historic Preservation Office will have to sign off on plans.

The Heritage Commission has asked for \$3 million to be included in the governor’s budget request to the 2013 Legislature, to be used for rehabilitation of Reeder’s Alley, Virginia City and Nevada City.

But that proposed budget will not be released until mid-November. And with a new governor and legislature taking office in January, it’s unclear what level of funding will result.

Meanwhile, business goes on at Reeder’s Alley.

Prendergast, the route to her restaurant already via a detour, would like to see a temporary staircase. And she’s concerned that extensive repairs could limit access to the top of the structure or cut it off completely during summer, her busiest season.

She also questions why it’s taken the commission so long to get to the problems that have been eating at the structure for years, questioning whether the commission has given Reeder’s Alley the same attention it has to Virginia City and Nevada City, which include about 100 buildings each.

“They knew about this eight years ago and didn’t do anything about it,” she said. “When you ignore something, it doesn’t go away.”

Reeder's Alley problems force businesses to relocate



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Structural issues with a building in historic Reeder's Alley in Helena this week forced the relocation of several tenants and the closure of a stairway leading to a restaurant.

Officials say the issues appear to be related to water seeping under sidewalks and the foundations of structures in the area, some of which are 130 years old. Reeder's Alley is state-owned and managed by the Montana Heritage Commission, which is part of the Montana Department of Commerce. Along with Reeder's Alley, the commission oversees Virginia City and Nevada City in southwest Montana.

The movement of two tenants and closure of the stairs took place on Monday. A large sign notes the stairway closure, while other signs outline an alternative route to Papa Tony's restaurant, which sits at the top of the stairs.

"It's a little disconcerting in the middle of the tourist season to close the stair case," said Mike Casey, a Helena real estate broker and property manager hired by the Montana Heritage Commission to help manage Reeder's Alley. "But it's better to do that than have people exposed to loose bricks and the stairs."

The structural issues appear to be centered on a building next door to the restaurant that houses restrooms and several offices. Cracks and leaning walls are clearly visible in the structure. While the problems are not new, a tenant told officials that the structural issues may be getting worse. That report prompted the decision to move the tenants and close the nearby stairs, Casey said.

While the buildings are old and prone to masonry problems, Casey said experts, including a structural engineer and a state architect, suspect that water may have found a way under sidewalks and could be eroding the walls.

Elijah Allen, the business and development manager for the heritage commission, said he hopes to have a

structural engineer's report next week. Initial estimates show the cost of immediate repairs to be about \$35,000, Allen said, noting if that figure holds, work will begin shortly.

"But there are other structural issues too," he said. "If the cost of fixing those turns out to be a couple hundred thousand, we are going to have to rely on grants and other funding. That means the repairs will take longer."

"Hopefully, this will be a catalyst to get the money and restoration work under way," said Casey, the property manager. "Once you tear into an old building, you don't know what you are going to find."

The solution for drainage issues could involve building a collection basin up the hill above Reeder's Alley that would allow rain water and other run-off to be gathered and diverted away from the buildings, Casey said, noting there have water-related issues in the past.

"Everything is built on a hill; it all runs down," he said.

Reeder's Alley is made up of four structures that were built between 1872 and 1884 by Lewis Reeder, a mason from Pennsylvania.

"Old buildings need a lot of attention," Casey said, noting his concern that sustained rains or even seismic events could lead to broader problems with the structures.

Kathy Prendergast, owner of Papa Tony's, says customers are still finding a way to her door and business has been solid, despite the closure of the stairway. But she is unhappy with the heritage commission for a variety of reasons.

"There was no mention of the structural problem that could affect my business when I signed the lease," she said Thursday. "As far as I'm concerned, MHC has neglected it for years."

Prendergast said officials rejected her request for temporary stairs that could maintain direct access to the restaurant. The stairs could be located away from the troubled building, she said.

She also expressed frustration that her one-year lease for the space, which ends Aug. 31, was not renewed by commission officials.

Allen said the lease wasn't renewed because he and others expect repair work to be taking place outside the restaurant.

"It's a safety issue," he said. "We don't want bricks falling on customers when they enter the restaurant."

Allen said he thought there was a tentative agreement with Prendergast to move her business to another location in Reeder's Alley where she would establish a kitchen for a catering and food-cart operation.

The three tenants affected by the building issues, including Prendergast, were given free rent for July and August, Allen said.

Vicky Soderberg, one of the tenants who moved this week, confirmed the free-rent deal. She operates a tourism consulting business.

“Personally, they’ve been taking care of me,” she said. “My business is not one where I have people coming to my office. I could, in theory, move anywhere.”