

# Decision coming on saving Davids Island buildings

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## NEW ROCHELLE

Workers already are removing some of the crumbling buildings on Davids Island where soldiers once lived, prayed and played, and the time has come to choose which buildings, if any, should stay.

The head of the Army Corps of Engineers-led cleanup, Gregory Goepfert, plans to meet in the next few weeks with representatives of the city, county, state and an association of people who once lived at the former Fort Slocum, which operated on the island for about a century. History buffs say it would be a shame to lose all of the buildings.

"That's the last bit of American soil on which a lot of (soldiers) set foot in the 20th century," said Michael Cavanaugh, a California resident who lived on the island for three years as a child. He founded an association of people who once lived there, and he is included in the circle of people Goepfert consults with on questions of what to do with the former fort.

The problem is money. The Corps of Engineers could leave buildings standing, but a study commissioned last year by the agency showed that shoring up several buildings could cost millions of dollars. The former post headquarters alone, for example, could cost as much as \$4.5 million to renovate.

Westchester County officials did not count on those costs - or the expense of maintaining buildings and protecting them from graffiti - when County Executive Andrew Spano agreed several years ago to buy the 78-acre island from New Rochelle to create a park, said Gina D'Agrosa, the Westchester County watermaster.

"I don't think we ever envisioned that that park would be a historic monument to Fort Slocum," she said.

D'Agrosa said a better plan would be to compile a video presentation with photographs of the buildings to capture the island's history.

"We were hoping that rather than spend millions of dollars for the restoration of one building, spend a small portion of that and preserve the experience of the island as a fort," she said. "We thought that would be more efficient and reasonable."

### Give your opinion

People who have thoughts about which buildings on Davids Island should stay may write to Gregory Goepfert, project manager, at: **Gregory Goepfert** U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 26 Federal Plaza, New York, NY 10278

D'Agrosa said the county did not specifically advocate removing all of the buildings, but "if they all go, we're not going to fight it."

Barbara Davis, New Rochelle's acting city historian and another participant in the discussions, said it would be "morally irresponsible" to leave none of the buildings from the days when Fort Slocum was an important military post. A video recording of the history is not the same as having the buildings in place, she said.

"You really can't sense it or feel it until you see the actual structures and the landscape to give people a sense of what the base was like," she said.

The island's military history began when it was used as a hospital during the Civil War, and continued into the 1960s. The Corps of Engineers is cleaning up the island with \$18.1 million in federal funds. So far, workers have demolished about half of the 93 buildings there, but they included the smaller, flimsier ones and those with few structural remains left, Goepfert said.

The Corps of Engineers is consulting with the county, the city, the state Historic Preservation Office, Cavanaugh and Davis. Goepfert has asked them to suggest which buildings should be left standing. Several buildings make most of the lists - the post headquarters, a tile-roofed chapel and a former YMCA building among them.

Goepfert is seeking museums that display military or coastal history to find some that might want a door or keystone from one building or another so they would live on in some way.

The Corps of Engineers' study of the costs showed the brick headquarters, built around 1910 in a Classical Revival style, would cost some \$3.6 million renovate for a modern use, or \$4.5 million to rebuild a historical interior. To preserve the outside walls as they are, while removing the collapsed roof, interior walls and floors, would cost about \$1 million.

The 1913 chapel, with its stucco sides and partially collapsed clay tile roof, would cost \$1.6 million to renovate for use - or \$2 million if it were restored to a historically accurate look. Preserving what's left without renovating it would cost about \$700,000.

Even preserving the footprint of the buildings with ground markings carries a cost: \$61,000 for the chapel, more than \$230,000 for the YMCA building.

After consulting with historical organizations in the county, Davis suggested that those three buildings and 18 others be left standing. Others include the barracks buildings, a drill hall and gymnasium and the rusting water tower that is the tallest structure on the island and a visual landmark that can be seen from the shore. Davis said it was difficult to determine exactly what should be saved when no one has decided exactly what to do with it once the county obtains it for parkland.

Cavanaugh submitted a plan with several versions that centered on the parade grounds, a long, broad rectangle that runs up the west side of the island.

The meeting to decide which buildings to save will not be open to the public, Goepfert said. But people who want to offer their opinions may write to him.

Jim Nordgren, a vice president of the Federated Conservationists of Westchester County, said the organization hoped at least one building is saved and renovated into a visitors center. He said his group did not take a position on which building it would be, but he envisioned it holding displays to highlight the island's past and the history and ecology of Long Island Sound. It could be fitted with a solar power system and a geothermal system for heating and cooling. He said grants were available for such projects.

"It's such a great cause, I would think there would be a lot of people willing to step forward and be willing to contribute," he said.

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