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Volunteers will enhance elevator

Landmark building in line for face-lift

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The Rochester Elevator has had its ups and downs in the last couple of years. Revered by some as an icon of the community's history, it's also seen as blight by others who want it cleaned up.

Come June 6, the enduring symbol of Rochester's rural past will get a face-lift. A fresh coat of paint will be applied by volunteers organized by the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, with assistance by professional painters above the first floor.

"We have a great committee going and things are moving along at a pretty fast pace now," RAHS President Rod Wilson told the Rochester City Council May 11. About 100 people are expected to pick up their brushes around 10 a.m. Roads surrounding the elevator will be closed.

"Just the amount of people moving back and forth, we're quite concerned about the traffic," Wilson said. "We're trying to work out right now how to paint in shifts, so we don't have to have 100 people painting all at the same time."

Wilson said the elevator has been power washed and a stencil was made of the signage on the north end, "so that can be put back up."

"The entire building then will receive, over the next couple of weeks, a base coat," he said. The awning will receive rust protection before being painted an aluminum color.

"The north end, where the signage was, will be painted white ... and then the sign painter will come back and fill that in with red for the checkerboard and blue for around the letters," he said.

Volunteers will be fed and even serenaded by a barbershop quartet. The project is being paid for by the RAHS and the elevator's owner, Lawrence Smith. No city funds are involved.

HISTORIC SPOT

According to local history books, the corner of East University and Water has held an elevator since 1880, when the Griggs Elevator was erected. Then, in 1909, the Newberry Elevator, which was built elsewhere in 1872, was moved and added to the Griggs Elevator. It was the place Rochester farmers brought their products to be shipped via the railroad. After the railroad stopped running in the 1970s, it was converted to an agricultural store.

In recent years, when a potential buyer emerged for the property, the RAHS made plans to move the elevator to city-owned vacant property on the Clinton River. That deal fell through and, since then, a plan to keep it on its historic site and make it the focal point of a new city gathering space has been well-received.

"People have said, 'Gee, this is privately owned, why are you doing this?'" Wilson said. "The elevator itself may be privately owned, but the community owns the heritage. And that's what we're trying to protect."

"I've cleaned my paint brush and I'll be there," Rochester Mayor Jeff Cuthbertson said. "It's great to see a broad community effort to protect a historic resource."

"The primary goal of the Rochester Historical Commission this year is to somehow get that elevator into adaptive reuse," Councilman David Becker said. "We'll be seeing that proposal at our next meeting. ... This is a structure that has to be somehow preserved for the future of the community."

Rain date for the painting is June 13.

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