

REVITALIZATION Carnegie Library bill could top \$1.8 million

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The architect surveying the old Carnegie Library on North Main Street in Darlington has submitted his final report about the building, a report that revealed that a complete refurbishment

with all the bells and whistles could top \$1.8 million.

That figure came in much higher than city officials and others had anticipated, but panic did not set in, because officials believe



Architect
Ben Whitener

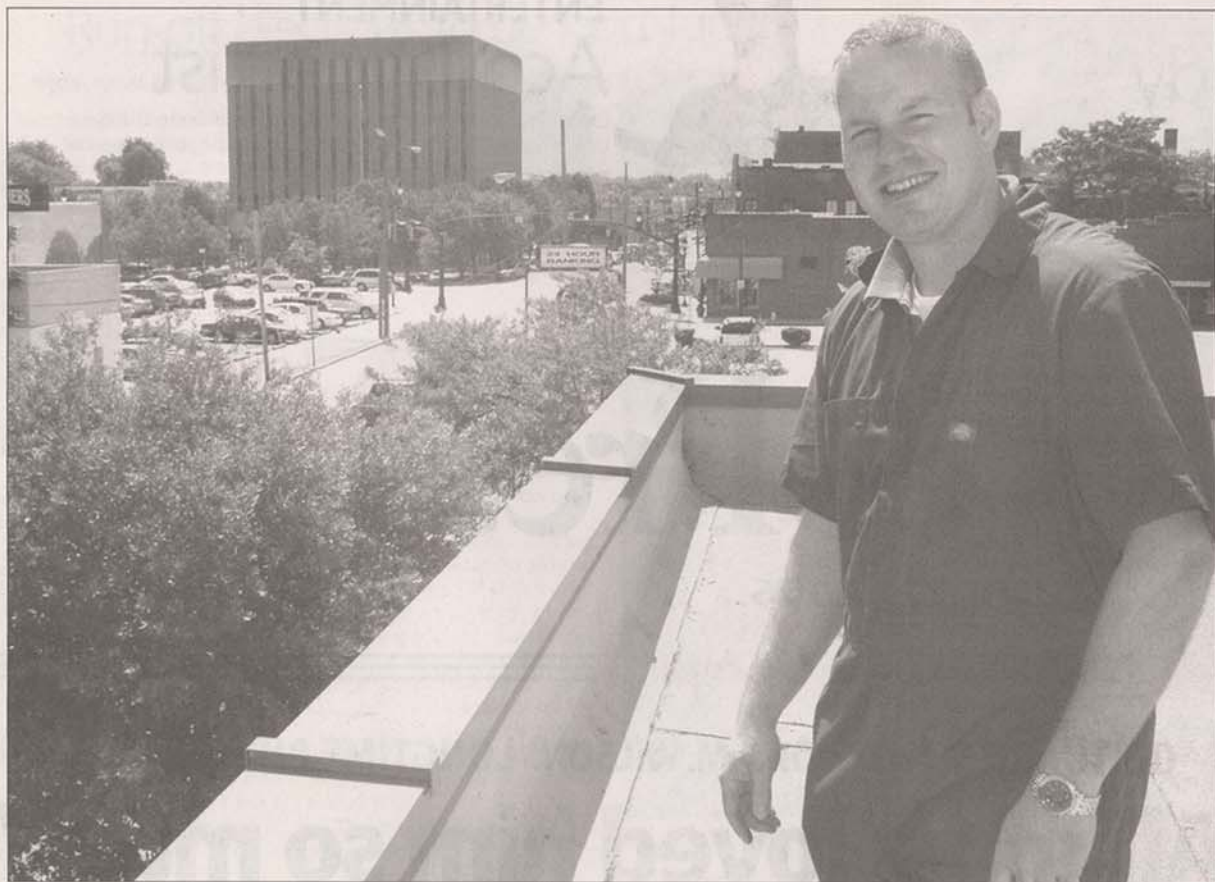
the project can be completed for far less cash.

Darlington City Planner Howard Garland said that he believes as much as \$500,000 could be shaved off the final dollar figure. Others have said that the project could proceed in stages that ease the financial burden as well.

For starters, the plan, prepared by Ben Whitener, AIA of Cummings and McCrady, Inc. in Charleston, added about \$235,000 to the estimated cost, figuring that unforeseen costs would arise. The cost breakdown reveals that just about every major sector of the building—which was built in 1920 with Carnegie Foundation dollars, doubled in size in 1939 and is on the National Register of Historic Places—is in need of a major overhaul.

Following \$226,700 earmarked for “general conditions”, major expenditures recommended include \$232,000 for masonry, \$220,000 for mechanical changes (new plumbing, HVAC, etc.), \$200,000 for new doors and windows, \$179,000 for site construction (grading, drainage, debris removal, etc.) and \$145,500 to replace antiquated electrical systems.

In fact, just name a building system and place the word antiquated after it to sum up the state of affairs. The library has been functionally dormant since the late 1980s when the new library was opened. After closing it suffered water damage until a new roof was put on it in the late 1990s. It has since resided in the bureaucratic purgatory otherwise known as the “backburner”.



Architect Ben Whitener surveys the scene off the roof of the old library.

Officials search for funding for Carnegie Library

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But city officials, City Council and the mayor have pledged to revive the Carnegie Library, with the most likely result being a cultural/fine arts center that could serve the community and promote tourism.

“Whatever we do, we really hope that the community will support it,” said Darlington City Manager Rodney Langley. “If the community is not going to support it we’re just going to be spinning our wheels. It will go down the tubes. We’re talking about spending a lot of money to do something really nice for the community.”

As Howard Garland put it, the city has already lost the old County Courthouse, the old city hall, the Park Terrace hotel and other historic structures.

“That library is the last

vestige of county or municipal buildings around the Square that predates World War II,” Garland said.

Helping ease anxiety about the project is the fact Rep. John Spratt’s office has already found about \$200,000 for the library, and that a request through the S.C. Budget and Control Board could help as well. Other funding sources are also being actively pursued that could greatly help the situation.

It’s doubtful that the Carnegie Library will ever become a cash cow, and city officials realize that. What they hope to do is to set up a situation where it could perhaps at least break even. Garland pointed to the project he helped set up in Mullins when city planner there, the S.C. Tobacco Museum. The Museum wanted to eventually raise enough money to have a full-time position endowed, and the city agreed to pay the difference until that happened. That situation could be copied in Darlington, with an annual budget of \$60,000 to \$100,000 paying for two positions and operating costs. A foundation, like one that supports Dillon County’s museum system, could

eventually draw enough interest to fund the budget.

The St. John’s Heritage Foundation’s Mary Demetrious, a key supporter of the Carnegie Library project, remained confident that much work would get done this summer on the library project. A city-based library committee should form soon, with Demetrious as a member, which should help move things along. The architect’s report will also provide a basis for progress.

She isn’t concerned that all of the city’s funding requests didn’t bear fruit during this past legislative session.

“It’s not going to be done in a month,” Demetrious said. “[But] it’s going to get done. It needs to get done.”

She still envisions a fine arts district in Darlington, including the J.C. Daniel Auditorium, the new library, the Dargan Amphitheater, the St. John’s Elementary School grounds and the refurbished Carnegie Library. The Carnegie Library could serve as a museum and fine arts center while somehow utilizing modern technology as well.

“I don’t know how we’re going to work that all in and

what we’ll call it, but Darlington is a small town and we don’t have a museum for all of that,” she said. “We’ve got to incorporate all of that into this one center and hopefully it will grow. You’ve got to think big.”

She remembers when local residents rolled their eyes at the prospect of transforming a kudzu-choked swamp into what’s now the current library. That project was unquestionably a success.

One reason for the consensus about the use of the Carnegie Library is that funding will not be forthcoming without it.

“You don’t just go out and say, ‘Give us this money, we want to do something with this building,’” Rodney Langley said. “You’ve got to have a goal, a plan, for what you want to use the money for.”

City Council will also have to be on board for the project to work. City Council member Gloria Hines has repeatedly said that a museum idea could work. It’s best to get to work now, she said while recently touring the library.

“The deterioration will get worse and then it cost more money [if we continue to delay],” Hines said.