

News



Photograph by Brian Connelly

Craig Awbrey wants to restore the 125-year-old Sam Cloud barn on Big Basin Way to its former glory. The local developer and builder purchased the building from Helen and Joseph Brozda, and plans to turn it into commercial office space.

Even Sam Cloud has a silver lining

By Kaustuv Basu

The decrepit looking yellow-and-white building lists slightly to its right. Flyers pasted all around the three-story structure menacingly warn that it is structurally unsafe.

It's the Sam Cloud barn, a 125-year-old building tucked away behind Bella Saratoga restaurant on Big Basin Way. The barn is intimately connected with the history of the area and once housed horses and carriages.

The horses and carriages are long gone. But the building is staying. In fact, it is about to get a new lease on life.

Craig Awbrey, a local developer and builder, has elaborate plans to restore the barn to its former glory. He is buying the building from Helen and Joseph Brozda, who have owned the property for close to 32 years. The barn was listed for sale in March 2004.

"I received a mass email from a real estate broker saying that the building was being sold," Awbrey said. He moved quickly.

This month, Awbrey will submit detailed renovation plans to the city's planning department. He plans to lease or sell the 5,000-square-foot building as commercial office space.

The barn, at various times in its history, has been used as a meeting hall, an electronics repair shop, a printing press and a storage unit. The Saratoga News was even printed there for a while.

Over the last year, Awbrey has worked painstakingly with the city's heritage preservation commission and planning department to get his pet project going.

The Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 damaged the building somewhat and made it tilt slightly to one side. In September 2003, the barn was declared structurally unsafe after an inspection by city building officials.

Sometime in the next few months, construction workers will start the process of making the building habitable again.

Awbrey eyes light up when he talks about the plans for the barn. "We'll have to structurally retrofit the barn. The entire building is made out of redwood oak. You don't see that anymore," he said.

The developer has enlisted the help of architect and historian Warren Heid for the project. Heid is an old hand at restoring historic structures. In fact, his office on Big Basin Way is located in one of Saratoga's oldest buildings.

"We will be putting in an elevator. The windows will need double insulation," Heid said.

The project is expected to take between nine months to a year to complete.

According to Heid, the building will be made Americans with Disabilities Act accessible. A new exterior staircase will be added while an automatic sprinkler system will be installed inside.

Renovating the building poses special challenges because it is built on a steep hill. "We have space for six offices in the building with about two on each floor," he said.

Awbrey is so taken with the barn that he might actually move his own office there.

"There's a reason this building has survived two major earthquakes—one in 1906 and one in 1989. It was built to last," Awbrey said. "But the only thing holding it together now is rusty nails ... This building is a treasure and I'm going to restore it to its original splendor."

Awbrey said that before he showed an interest in the building, there had been some talk of tearing it down. "That would have been a real travesty," he said.

April Halberstadt, curator of the Saratoga Historical Museum and author of a book called *Classic Barns*, said the Sam Cloud Barn is a very unique urban structure.

"Authentic early California barns were rare to begin with because few early farmers built barns," she said. "It is thought that the Sam Cloud barn was probably associated with the early toll road and stage line that went up Lumber Street into the Santa Cruz Mountains," she said.

Awbrey said that he wants to make sure that the building lasts for another 150 years, and also be certain that its past won't be forgotten.

"We plan to have a special 'history wall' inside the building," he said.

Awbrey said the wall would tell the story of the Sam Cloud barn through pictures and captions.

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