Barnwell ml 07 14

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Culture and the arts have thrived in Shreveport over the years, much of it financed all or in part by the contributions of individuals who gave money, buildings, or other forms of support. Constructed in 1970, the R.S. Barnwell Memorial Garden & Art Center was built "to advance cultural activities in the City of Shreveport," according to the city's 2008 promotional website. Half its original cost was donated by the family of Louisiana oil magnate R.S. "Cap" Barnwell, but the Barnwell was to be owned and operated by the city.

Visitors may it difficult to discern where the Barnwell begins and ends because so many commemorative entities seem to share its site. A 1983 plaque recognizes the Barnwell Gardens. A marble pillar and bust honors Clyde Fant and the parkway that bears his name. The Fragrance Garden commemoration bears the date of 1988. The City of Shreveport Bird Sanctuary apparently was dedicated December 20, 1960. Lions and Rotary club plaques mark the entrance to a circular area honoring law enforcement and fire department personnel.

As botanical gardens go, the Barnwell's 7,850-square-foot conservatory is not insignificant, about one-fourth the size of the United States Botanic Garden's 28,944 of growing space. The goals of both entities were much the same, to display "living treasures of the plant world."

Although the Barnwell's plexiglass dome is beginning to deteriorate, its aluminum framework is sound. After 44 years in the sun, the covering panels are deteriorating. That is not unexpected. Similarly, the Bloedel Conservatory in Queen Elizabeth Park, Vancouver, erected in 1969, will have its replacement roof completed this fall. The Bloedel is less than twice the size of the Barnwell, and a major tourist attraction in British Columbia. Up until the time that it closed, the Barnwell was similarly considered to be a key attraction in Shreveport's tourism package, with plants from around the world and three art galleries. Some of the plants that were growing – or may still survive there – are seen nowhere else in the United States except perhaps in Hawaii, says Barnwell supporter Lamar Pugh.

To Pugh, the Barnwell's decline was pre-ordained when the city agreed to take down neighboring greenhouses that grew replacement plants so that the Louisiana 14th riverboat casino (the fifth in the Shreveport-Bossier City market) could be built on the site in 2000. However, in the time before the city decided to close the Barnwell, supposedly temporarily to bring the building into ADA compliance and make repairs, visitation was rising. It seemed to be the city's "hottest venue for weddings" and many took senior pictures in the conservatory.

Friends of the Barnwell president Scotty Rogers likens the Barnwell's decline to killing an oak tree: cut off part of its roots (the greenhouses), limit its water (parking), otherwise give it willful neglect, and gradually it will die. "I'm not sure if the ventilation system has ever worked," he commented.

To be viable, the Barnwell needs better parking and restrooms. It needs to be able to offer food and drink. There needs to be an assessment of the damage done by closing the facility, Rogers stated. And someone should find out what happened to the succulent plant collection that appears to have been removed from the supposedly locked-down building.

By the time artist Judy Horne joined the Friends of the Barnwell board five or six years ago, city-provided support seemed less than adequate, providing staffing for a director, secretary, and two part-time receptionists. There were no funds provided for a maintenance and care of the conservatory itself, although there had been in the past.

The city "didn't seem to have a problem with us at all until January 2012," Horne said, until announcing that the contract between the city and the Friends of the Barnwall to conduct programming, and schedule and monitor events would not be renewed. During the time that the Friends had held the contract, there was to be no charge for programming because the building was owned by the city.

Along with the announcement of an impending closing, Friends of the Barnwell felt that the city "seemed to be disappointed because it was receiving no return on the city's investment," Horne said. Yet members of the Friends paid annual dues to support programming, sponsoring Hot Jazz on the Red concerts and a laser light show at Christmas time.. The group organized clean-up days, removing vines from across the walkways and taking out "a truckload of stuff."

The variety of garden clubs had already moved out after they were asked to pay for using meeting space. Many had no formal structure or budget. In the past, there was a meeting in the building nearly every night – horticulturists, Master Gardeners, bromeliad and orchid growers, and more. The art groups followed.

Now the Barnwell's future seems up for grabs. Water has been turned off in the building for 18 months. Those plants that remain alive have survived not only artificial drought but two winters as well as one hot Louisiana summer.

There are some in the community who believe the building cannot be repaired and should simply be replaced. Some think the structure should be converted to other uses, perhaps with the removal of the plexiglass panels but leaving the dome's structure intact. Pugh has been finding a national expert consultant who can evaluate what it would take to restore the conservatory.

And there is a larger sticking point ahead for Shreveport. If this valuable part of the community, built with donated dollars and intended to be a memorial, is in effect discarded by the city, how eager will future donors be to honor family and friends by contributing to city projects?

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