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What's old is renewed

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A key part of Fort Collins' past will be the cornerstone of one of its newest subdivisions.

A 1890s farmhouse northeast of Hewlett-Packard off Ziegler Road is being preserved for its place in the city's history and as the centerpiece of the proposed 13-home Hidden Pond Estates.

It's an effort by owners Wendi and Jason Beld to blend the importance of the city's agrarian roots with its contemporary future.

By doing so, the Belds are putting a value on the city's history and adding economic value, said Karen McWilliams, the city's preservation planner.

"Developments that have a historic element oftentimes sell for more money," McWilliams said. "People tend to appreciate the historic ambiance even if it's not necessarily in their own home but in the community."

It's a project five years in the making for the Belds, who bought the original farmhouse and 15.2 acres five years ago, hoping to create an events center.

When those plans fizzled, the couple looked at a subdivision, "but not one where it's house upon house upon house," Wendi Beld said. Fifty percent of the land will remain in open space, according to city specifications.

They came up with a plan for 13 homes on nearly half-acre lots - large by Fort Collins' standards.

But the development starts with the historic renovation of what will eventually be home to the Belds' growing family.

The couple has three children and another due in April.

Colorado Custom Homes of Windsor gutted the nearly 120-year-old two-story brick structure preserving the exterior in its original form.

They'll finish the interior with period-appropriate fixtures, a claw-foot tub in the bathroom and wood flooring while adding modern amenities, such as heat on the second floor and a new master suite downstairs.

They'll build a new garage with carriage house, move a historically significant barn, raze a couple additions "that look horrible" and landscape the property.

The value of preserving the historically significant home - while often more expensive than building new - should not be underestimated, McWilliams said. "Whenever anyone has the opportunity to preserve an element of our past and highlight that, it benefits the community by retaining and putting a value on our history and generally promotes community aesthetics."

A 2005 study on the economic benefits of historic preservation points out rehabbing a historic building has a direct impact on the purchase of labor and materials used in the project but also provides jobs.

Beld said they "definitely want the farmhouse to be done right. That will be the first thing people will see when they come out to Hidden Ponds," she said. "We want people to come out and see that it's been done right."

David Tschetter, principal with Colorado Custom Homes, said historic renovation "has its challenges" including unexpected surprises.

"It's amazing what you find or don't find that should be there," said Tschetter, who owns Colorado Custom Homes with his brother Jon.

"There's no way to plan for that stuff. In new construction, everything is engineered and real easy. You don't have to fix it on the fly."

Colorado Custom Homes will also build the other homes as the lots are bought.

There's no time frame at this point, but Tschetter expects the area to be in demand because of its larger lots and proximity to the Harmony corridor and natural spring-fed pond.

"When people get to know this project a little, they will absorb those lots quicker than people think. It's a unique lot size for Fort Collins property ... there may be two other areas that offer Fort Collins schools that offer a half-acre lot. That will be tough to beat."

Wendi Beld expects their \$500,000 to \$600,000 investment in renovating the house to be returned twofold, resulting in an assessed value of more than \$1 million.

It's still more of an investment than they would have likely spent had they built new, because the house had been added on to four times, lacked heat on the second floor and was costly to get new electrical run through brick walls, Beld said.

"We just keep plugging away and keep paying the bills," Beld said.

When it's all said and done, "they'll have a million-dollar-plus home with the additional value because of the historic character," McWilliams said.

"There's the whole intangible aspect of the appearance, the character of historic brick or wood that modern materials can't replicate." Whenever possible to renovate, it's a win-win, she said.

The Cook/Tyler farm, as it is known, was one of the early sheep ranches in the county, where Lee Cook lived with his mother and brother, according to city history.

Sheep ranching was key to the city's economic development, McWilliams said, and the reason Fort Collins High School's mascot is the Lambkins and CSU's is the Rams.

The farm was eligible for the national register of historic places because of its association with the development of agriculture in Fort Collins.

"Architecturally it's one of the region's oldest and largest farmhouses (in the city) and distinctive among the remaining farmhouses in the area," she said.