Heir unhappy with city's handling of house

BY EMILY BECK COGBURN
Special to The Advocate

ZACHARY — The historic Annison Plantation House has suffered neglect at the hands of the city, says Dwight Annison, grandson of the late Ethel Brubham Annison, donor of the antebellum house to Zachary in 2002.

"I didn't agree with the decision to give the house to the city," Annison told City Council members this week. "I wanted to fix it up and live in it. I was worried about exactly what has happened today. My grandmother and aunts gave the house to the city in good faith. They hoped it would become a museum and that people would go and see it."

The home was built around 1813 and the seven-tenths of an acre of land on which it sits was part of a 1799 Spanish land grant.

When the house was donated to the city, the late Lois Hastings, who at that time served as Zachary's Historic Village director, said that its layout was similar to that of Magnolia Mound Plantation in Baton Rouge.

Hastings asserted that opening Annison House to the public would contribute, among other things, toward improving students' understanding of the history of Zachary.

The act of donation stipulated that the site be known as "Annison Plantation" and be dedicated to the memory of Ethel Annison's late husband, Willie Eugene Annison Sr.

The City Council accepted donation of the house during former Mayor John Womack's final days in office.

City Councilman Tommy Womack is the son of the late Mayor Womack.

The act of donation allows the Annison heirs to take back the property if the city doesn't take care of the house or use it as the family wished. Annison said that he built a house to live in and does not want the plantation home back.

"We want to see it fixed up and used like it was intended to be used. We're disappointed that the city hasn't lived up to its end of the deal," Annison said.

The City Council decided during its Tuesday night discussion of Annison House to form a committee to explore its options for preserving and using the property.

Council members Brandon Noel and Tommy Womack agreed to serve on the committee, along with Jean Byers, the council clerk and director of Zachary's Historic Village, and members of the Zachary Historical Association to be named later.

The Annison House, on La. 964, is not inside the city limits, although property on the opposite side of the highway is part of the city.

Annison questioned whether that was the reason for the city administration's lack of attention to the plantation home.

Mayor David Amrhein denied that the location just outside the city limits affected city government's decisions regarding the building.

"I was on the council when we voted to take the house," Amrhein said. "I had reservations about taking it then. I asked what events will be held there, who will visit, etc. I am still asking those questions."

During former Mayor Henry Martinez's administration, the city received a $140,000 state grant to spend on improvements to the home it was presented. This June, however, the council discussed filing a form to allow the $140,000 to be spent elsewhere.

City/Chief Administrative Officer Chris Calbert suggested at that time that the Annison House grant money might be better spent upgrading municipal natural gas lines and erecting a new water tower.

The form was filed and is awaiting state approval, city Director of Administration Steve Nunery said.

The mayor reiterated during Tuesday's meeting the need for fixing gas lines in the historic district of town. "We have to pay for each line that leaks gas," he said.

He argued that the plantation house would need costly, ongoing improvements.

"That was my beef then (when the donation was accepted) and it still is. Grants are harder to find," Amrhein said.

The mayor said Annison House has been used for only seven events in the past three years. "We have spent $78,000 on the house since 2010. Where does it stop?" Amrhein wanted to know.

By state mandate, the $140,000 grant could not be spent at Annison House until ramps and handicapped-accessible restrooms were installed there. The city spent $13,000 in engineering fees to assess the feasibility of the proposed changes, but ultimately decided not to make the renovations, the mayor said.

The lack of restrooms and the inconvenient location are some of the reasons school groups and others don't visit the plantation home, he said.

Byers said that if the city keeps the house, someone should be hired to open the plantation home to the public at least a few days a week.

There are possible uses for Annison House, Byers said, such as a living history museum, a park or an educational site for students.