Railroad depot targeted

By MIKE INGALLINERA
Staff Writer

The Southern Pacific Railroad Depot on Grant Street could fall victim to the wrecking ball any day now unless public or private efforts are initiated to preserve the Lafayette landmark.

The Acadian Metropolitan Code Authority has issued a building permit to the local division of the Southern Pacific Transportation Company which gives the company permission to immediately demolish the 60-year-old structure.

The depot is being considered as a site for a "multimodal" transportation terminal for COLT, Greyhound buses and taxicabs in a current study being funded by a $24,000 federal grant and $6,000 of city money. The city council approved the study by Wilbur Smith Associates on May 31.

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P.E. Martin, a Lafayette office engineer for Southern Pacific, applied for the permit to demolish the depot which was approved by the Metro Code on May 27.

"It's too close to the main track," said Martin. "It has to be demolished. The city knows all the particulars. We offered to give it to the city if they would move it to another location, but the mayor said that would be too cost-prohibitive."

"We will probably tear it down within the next month or two," said Martin.

Jim Johnston, manager of public relations for Southern Pacific's eastern lines, said the company has a policy of eliminating its structures which are "redundant" or no longer being used.

The Lafayette depot is one of over 100 such structures in a 14-state system, he said. Although AMTRAK still uses the Southern Pacific railway line and stops in Lafayette, passenger tickets are sold on the train.

"Does Lafayette want another financial burden on its hands?" Johnston asked Friday. "Would it not become a long-term liability?"

If the Lafayette Preservation Commission tried to protect the depot with an historical designation, Johnston said, federal law would still allow Southern Pacific to demolish the structure if the company did not agree with the commission's action.

Southern Pacific donated the locomotive Sabine to Lafayette in 1923. The Sabine was the first locomotive to pull a passenger train from New Orleans to Texas and was used at a New Iberia sugar refinery following its retirement in 1907. The Sabine was reduced to scrap during World War II because of a materials shortage in 1943.

"We gave the city the Sabine, and what did they do with it? They cut it up for scrap!" said Johnston. "So, you see what the history of our donation to Lafayette has been."

Mario Mamalakis, an USL public relations representative, said that it was Southern Pacific who reduced the Sabine to scrap, not the city.

"The sad thing is that the scrap was never used in the war effort," Mamalakis said. "It was going to be used to make bullets."

Mamalakis has described the depot as "probably Lafayette's most historically significant structure in continuous use for the purpose for which it was constructed."

USL Professor Ethel Goodstein, chair of the Lafayette Landmark Preservation Advisory Committee, said that after the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, the depot is probably Lafayette's most significant landmark.

"It speaks to the essence of what Lafayette was in the past and what it is today as a community," said Goodstein. "In terms of trying to find a common denominator for what constitutes an historical landmark, it is a great physical structure. It is extremely salvageable and structurally sound."

Mayor Lastrapes said Friday that he was unaware of the permit which was issued by Metro Code to Southern Pacific.

Lastrapes later contacted Southern Pacific to request a moratorium on the demolition of the depot.

Johnston recommended that Lastrapes write to Southern Pacific Transportation in San Francisco, to inform him about the study.

"We're sending a letter by FAX right now," Lastrapes said Friday. "We're asking them to hold up the demolition until they have a chance to look at the (multimodal terminal) study with us."