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City is wary of the Castle on the Hill

Unusual 80-year-old building has loads of structural issues, may need to be demolished

BY ERIC BARTELS

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A city bureau has been given permission to lay siege to Canterbury Castle.

The basalt-sided fortress, based loosely on a 12th-century redoubt in southern England, has towered over the West Hills just east of Washington Park for nearly 80 years.

But the medieval-style structure, equal parts majesty and whimsy, is in disrepair and threatening its Arlington Heights neighbors. One of the city's options is to demolish it – if the current owner doesn't beat them to it.

The property is owned by the financial services company JPMorgan Chase & Co., which acquired it in a foreclosure proceeding in January.

Earlier this week, the owner of a Hillsboro engineering firm confirmed that his company had submitted a cost estimate for the dismantling of the castle. He said no contract has been tendered for the work and that he does not know who requested the estimate.

"I'm not sure who it is," said Manuel Castaneda of PLI Systems. "We had to fax the information. A lot of times they try to keep this stuff kind of secretive."

Darcy Wilmot, a Seattle-based spokesperson for JPMorgan Chase, would neither confirm nor deny that the company is seeking to demolish the building.

The razing of the castle would represent a nightmare ending to the dreams of former owner Sidney Lynne, whose family wrangled with the city over safety and compliance issues for most of the four and a half years it lived in the castle.

The family stopped making payments on the property and moved out in January. Since then, Lynne has become a one-woman crusade to publicize the plight of the property, seeking help from everyone from city Commissioner Randy Leonard to TV home-improvement guru Bob Vila.

"History is really important to me," she says. "People are so excited about the castle. Probably 95 percent of the neighborhood does care what happens to it."

Mike Liefeld, compliance services manager for the city's bureau of development services, says he appreciates what the castle means to a city that has long valued individuality and imagination. But he says the issue is clear cut from a safety standpoint.

"The building is in a dangerous state," says Liefeld. A code hearing order generated by the bureau on Feb. 9 identifies as trouble spots unstable soil below the structure and places on the castle where stones weighing hundreds of pounds are separating from the underlying wooden sheeting. City officials remain concerned about the potential of land slides.

In 2006, a falling tree bough triggered a cascade of stones, damaging a gas main.

"It's not horizontal wood siding; it's very heavy stone," says Liefeld. "Our concern is that, hey, if they continue to fall, they're going to take a couple of skips and go right out into the street."

From a distance, it's hard to see the castle – also known as Arlington Castle – as anything but rock solid. It was built by contractor and sometime architect Jeter O. Fry in the 1930s as a private residence.

Windmill palms planted around the property reinforce the sense of a jewel slightly out of place. The castle



Sidney Lynne is a former owner of the castle home just east of Washington Park in southwest Portland, which her family lost to foreclosure. She is now trying to save the structure from being demolished.

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looks like the kind of extravagance early movie icons might have demanded for themselves in the canyons surrounding Hollywood. The interior features Spanish-style white stucco, spiral staircases and quantities of wrought iron.

But the building's façade is clearly tiring. A buttressing wall along the east side is scarred by a half-inch crack several feet long; a three-story flanking tower on the opposite corner is missing dozens of stones.

Lynne and husband John Hefferin, who founded Portland's Nostalgic Realty, bought the castle in 2004 for \$469,000. Southwest Portland natives, they remembered the distinctive property from their early days, but also knew it needed help.

The couple went to work, first removing ivy from the exterior and plastering cracks in the mortar. But eventually, expensive landslide mitigation efforts, high heating bills, rising property taxes and jousting with the city over code compliance made the project unworkable, Lynne says.

She and her husband could not find a buyer before Chase foreclosed.

Canterbury Castle has appeared on the National Register of Historic Places, but such designations are superseded by public safety concerns, Liefeld said. If the city's demands are not met by April 30, a recent hearings officer decided, the bureau will be free to act as it sees fit.

An avid history buff, Lynne still hopes her "Disney Castle" can be saved.

Liefeld said the city is "open to proposals," but added: "We've got a dangerous situation out there. I can't stretch this out for two years to allow for a fundraising project."

Those living near the castle expressed mixed feelings about it.

"It does seem like a hazard," says neighbor Karissa Aleskus, who admits to crossing to the far side of Fairview Boulevard when walking below the castle. "If it could be restored properly, I think everybody would want it to stay. But at what expense and who is going to pay?"

Georgette Pan, a Portland lawyer who lives across narrow Canterbury Lane from the property, says "it's unique, but it's such a white elephant. You might love it, but if you can't do anything with it, it needs to go. I don't think the neighbors would mourn the loss of the castle."

Liefeld has not ruled out happily ever after. The castle's future, he says, not intending any irony, "is not set in stone."