

BEACON

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Readers capture young herons as they prepare for life's changes. PAGE 12



PLAYING TO HIS EARS

The New Yorker's visit to Salem Middle School on Oct. 12 was an added surprise for Parker's class, who had already found themselves star struck by the ongoing correspondence they had with him last year. The internationally known composer, who studied under Aaron Copeland and Stefan Mihalcea, has a 75-year career with more than 100 works to his name. Parker's class was prepar-

COMPOSER, Page 14



SANDRA J. PENNECKE

as Tylín Pugh plays the orchestra class.



VICKI CRONIS-NOHE | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

The city-owned Whitehurst-Buffington House, off North Landing Road near the Virginia Beach Municipal Center, was built in the late 18th century and has fallen into disrepair. Its property includes 217 acres.

A WINERY MIGHT BRING SOME CHEER

That's 1 of 3 ideas to restore historic house

By Rita Frankenberry
The Virginian-Pilot

A winery that would capitalize on the historic architecture of the Whitehu-

rst-Buffington House, and about three of the undeveloped acres it stands on, might soon get the green light from the City Council.

During a closed session last week, the council discussed this proposal and two others to develop the old farmhouse property.

Though a final vote is still several months away, the winery idea already has

the support of the Virginia Beach Historic Preservation Commission and most council members.

"We're always supposed to be looking for economic development, especially now," Councilwoman Rosemary Wilson said. "We need something that's going to add revenue to our

See WINERY, Page 19

The winery idea already has the support of the Virginia Beach Historic Preservation Commission and most of the City Council.

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WINERY

Continued from Page 1

tax base rather than take away."

An invitation for bids

The house, built in the 1790s and near the city's Municipal Center, is boarded up and has fallen into disrepair. Estimates to rehabilitate the city-owned structure are about \$200,000.

The city, interested in finding a way to restore and maintain the property without using city funding, requested proposals on how to develop it earlier this year.

By April, the city had received three bids.

In addition to Norfolk resident Jennifer Eichert's proposal to transform the property into the Mermaid Winery, another proposal came from Gareth R. Whitehurst, a Whitehurst family descendant living in Florida who offered to buy the old farmhouse from the city for \$150,000.

"He wants it to document the Whitehurst family genealogy," said Wilson, adding that Whitehurst's proposal also requested a city-provided docent to run the facility.

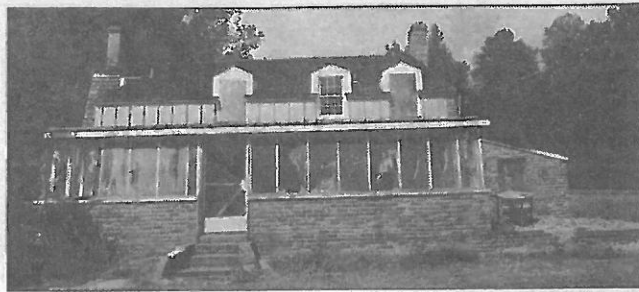
A third bid came from the Whitehurst-Buffington House Foundation and the Virginia Beach-based Foundation for the Fine Arts, seeking to turn the property into a nonprofit, community-based nature center.

Foundation proposes collaboration

Phyllis Sawyer, president of the Whitehurst-Buffington House Foundation, said the nature center would partner with groups like the Boy Scouts of America and the Virginia Museum of Natural History in Martinsville.

In addition to having exhibits there, the center could offer natural-history classes and outdoor programs and host city events and groups, Sawyer said.

If the foundation's idea is approved by the City Council, Joe Keiper, executive director of the Virginia Museum of Natural History, said the Whitehurst-Buffington House would become one of three outreach programs.



VICKI CRONIS-NOHE | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

This is the rear view of the Whitehurst-Buffington House, off North Landing Road.

The museum has educators at facilities in Charlottesville and Hampton.

"It would give us an opportunity to serve that part of the area," Keiper said, adding that the site is a perfect place for such a nature program. "It sits on a wonderful parcel of 200 acres of land. That's what makes this opportunity so attractive to us."

Paying the way

The 217 acres surrounding the historic house are part of the West Neck Creek Natural Area, which includes three miles of walking trails and a one-third-mile paved trail loop.

Sawyer said her group proposed leasing the property from the city and maintaining and renovating it with Whitehurst-Buffington Foundation funding.

Some City Council members are concerned that Virginia Beach would get saddled with some of the operating expenses relating to the Whitehurst-Buffington property should it be turned into a nature center.

In fiscal year 2011, which ended June 30, the city spent about \$165,000 on maintenance and operating costs for three historical properties - the Ferry Plantation House, deWitt Cottage and the Old Coast Guard Station.

"My concern is long-term, what's best for the property and the citizens," Wilson said. "At the end of the day, is it still going to cost taxpayers money?"

Earlier this year Mac Rawls, chairman of the Virginia Beach Historic Preservation Commission, said finding a light-commercial use for the historic property would be a way to maintain the house and provide revenue to the city.

"Historic-house atten-

dance is dropping throughout the state," Rawls said previously, also noting that these properties rarely make enough revenue to operate on their own.

Moving forward

The City Council's decision last week will allow Eichert to move forward with plans to develop the Mermaid Winery.

Eichert plans to lease the building and about 2.4 acres of the property, which still needs to be rezoned to allow for her proposal. Some of the acreage would be reserved for a 2,000-square-foot wine-making facility where Eichert would eventually produce her own bottled wines.

She plans on growing Petit Manseng grapes on about three-fourths of another acre, which would be used for white wines produced on the property. Eichert's plans also include an heirloom garden, an area to host wedding receptions, and wine-tasting rooms and offices in the house.

Development of the Whitehurst-Buffington property still faces a public hearing and a final vote by the City Council later this fall.

If the council approves her plan, Eichert said that in about three years she would be able to bottle the wine grown in her Virginia Beach vineyard. She also expects to hire six to 12 full-time employees and have annual sales of more than \$500,000.

Wilson said the winery is a good adaptive reuse of the property that would allow the house to be restored and also generate revenue for the city.

"It just seems like so many pluses," she added.

Rita Frankenberry, 222-5102, rita.frankenberry@pilotonline.com

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