

Manning sold to El Rio health center

Historic house downtown will be group's HQ



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DAILY STAR

The historic Manning House downtown has been sold to El Rio Community Health Center and will become its administrative headquarters.

After some renovations to the 106-year-old building, about 175 employees will move into the formal mansion and party venue.

Records from the Pima County Recorder's Office show the house sold for \$2.36 million.

It had faced possible foreclosure earlier this year.

"The health center board of directors is committed to being part of the revitalization of downtown (and) the preservation of an important historic building," said Kathy Byrne, El Rio's executive director.

She anticipates relocating workers from the Briannia Building at Palo Verde and Valencia roads by 2015, after remodeling work is complete.

Having the administrative workers downtown will put them in the center of El Rio's 16 clinics, Byrne said.

Also, a new, 54,000-square-foot clinic is under construction at 839 W. Congress St., west of Interstate 10. It is scheduled for completion next year.

El Rio had been looking for a spot downtown for almost two years, but lack of parking was an issue, said Richard Spaulding, strategic planner and facilities director.

"Suddenly, here comes the Manning House, and it has parking," he said. "We like the historic part of it. It seemed like the perfect fit."

Once a wedding, meeting site

The 37,000-square-foot Manning House is on 5.2 acres at 450 W. Paseo Redondo.

It was once a popular venue for weddings and meetings, but the owner, Colleen Concannon, discontinued renting the property last summer and put it up for sale. Her family had owned the property since 1997.

Concannon could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

The house is part of the El Presidio National Register Historic District and cannot be dramatically altered without approval from the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission and the City Council.

Ken Scoville, a historic preservation activist, said he hopes El Rio will keep some portion of the front room open to the public, perhaps with a space for fundraising that showcases the history of both El Rio and the Manning House.

"I'm probably more pessimistic than optimistic," he said.

Should El Rio only keep the exterior intact and gut the inside, "it would be another sad story amongst many sad stories in Tucson when it comes to historic preservation," Scoville said.

El Rio officials say they intend to preserve some piece of interior history and make space available for the public once employees are accommodated.

"It's a beautiful place, and I want to keep it a beautiful place," Spaulding said.

He said the two-year time frame is because that's how long El Rio has on its current lease - not that there will be two years' worth of construction.

In one of the house's rooms there's a fireplace, and a piece of carpet has been cut away to expose the original floor. Spaulding said that might be a good spot to showcase the history of Manning House and El Rio.

"We'll be sure to keep the historic," he said.

Built for Mayor Levi Manning

The Manning House was built in 1907 for Tucson Mayor Levi Manning. It has been a private residence, an Elks Club, office space and for the 17 years before it closed, a meetings and events venue.

With more than 79,000 patients a year, El Rio is the largest provider of health services to the uninsured and Medicaid recipients in Pima County.

Proponents of downtown development say it's fitting that a respected Tucson organization reside in a Tucson landmark, versus a bar or retail store moving there.

"It could have gone a lot of different ways," said Michael Keith, CEO of Downtown Tucson Partnership. "There's something very stable and solid about that building, and I think there's something very stable and solid about the programs El Rio has put together over the years."

On StarNet: Go to azstarnet.com/gallery for photos of the Manning House, then and now.

Did you know?

The first El Rio Clinic opened in 1970 on South Freeway Road in the former Mother Higgins juvenile detention center. (The juvie center was named for Clara Higgins, who