



This 36-year-old house on Honore Avenue in Sarasota, with architecture inspired by the antebellum mansions of Eufaula, Alabama, could become a demonstration home operated by Sarasota's Universal Design Coalition. Or, it could be torn down. Fund-raising is under way. [COURTESY PHOTO]

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Harold Bubil
Real Estate Editor
at Sarasota-Herald
Tribune

It's not one of the better-known landmarks in the area, but residents of southeast Sarasota likely are familiar with a "Victorian-style" house that had stood on Proctor Road, just east of Honore Avenue, since its construction by the Albritton family in 1981.

The house, no longer occupied, recently was moved a short distance to make way for a new assisted-living facility, HarborChase of Sarasota. It is hidden now behind a nature preserve on Honore, on a parcel separate from the facility's.

The next two months likely will decide the future of the ornate house, which has architecture that was inspired by the antebellum mansions of Eufaula, Alabama. As the story goes, a member of the Albritton family traveled through the town, near the border with Georgia and not far from the Florida panhandle, and fell in love with the city's treasure trove of architectural and historic gems.

The HarborChase board of directors would like to remove the house from its list of responsibilities, so it approached Sarasota's Universal Design Coalition to see if the mansion could be of use to the nonprofit organization, which promotes awareness and implementation of "aging-in-place" designs, methods and materials in residential settings.

Led by Tracy Lux and board chairman Larry Hale, the coalition is working to raise \$300,000 in cash or in-kind donations. The deadline is the end of July; Hale said the entire amount does not have to be raised but the coalition has to show by then that the project is viable and sustainable. Otherwise, the building likely will be demolished.

"We are excited about this opportunity," Lux said. "We educate people on the benefits of accessible home modifications to allow both mature people to age in place and those with mobility challenges, including pregnant women, moms and dads with strollers, or special-needs children to live safely at home."

With a long-term lease, Lux said the coalition could adapt the house to exhibit such modification products and serve as an education center. It could draw people from across the country, she added.

"We think that this project could be a significant asset as a destination attraction for our area," she said. "To the best of our knowledge, this type of center does not exist in Florida. There are only three UD (universal design) demonstration houses in the country, and two of those are private residences."

The coalition hopes to reuse the structure as an open-to-the-public demonstration house that teaches the principles of universal design, much in the way Florida House was built to demonstrate green-building methods, materials, technology and landscaping.

"It would be a tremendous demonstration house for us," said Hale, who is a consultant on universal design. "If you can stay in your home longer, that saves money."

The house does need some work. Utilities need to be reconnected. The powder room on the main level is too small to be considered accessible. "We've looked at redoing the kitchen to show UD features," Hale said. "We are looking to install an elevator, and also a display of a chair-lift, rather than actually installing one on the stairs, as they are really beautiful."

A curb would be removed from the master bathroom's shower to make it wheelchair-accessible. Carpet would be removed from the master bedroom floor, and doors would be widened for accessibility.

"We can make this happen."

Those who wish to help can contact UDC.Suncoast@gmail.com or go to EasyUniversalDesign.com.

Community partnerships are being sought.