

# Depot could get new role or disappear

**Checking it out:** Decatur is negotiating for ownership and looking into the cost of repairs.

**By Gabriella Boston**  
STAFF WRITER

In its 107-year history, it's housed a train depot, a music venue and a restaurant. But the future of what's known as the Freight Room, located on Howard Avenue in downtown Decatur, is unclear.

It could turn into a Welcome Center for the city of Decatur; it could be moved; it could even be torn down.

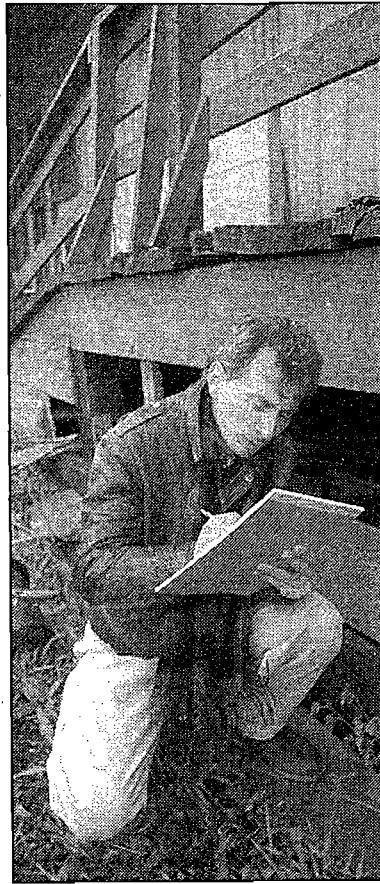
City officials are negotiating with the owner of the building, CSX Railroad, about possibly taking over ownership.

"CSX Railroad doesn't seem interested in the building. We're trying to get them to give the building to the city, and I feel very confident that this is going to work out," said Lyn Menne, director of Decatur's Downtown Development Authority.

Andrew Harris, mayor pro tem, sent a letter to CSX saying that the city would be willing to provide CSX Railroad with \$3 million of liability insurance.

The city also has proposed to CSX that it could possibly be used as office or retail space, including a Welcome Center or administrative offices, or as rental space for receptions and community events.

If CSX doesn't want the space to be used as a restaurant or bar, serving alcohol, the city would be willing to comply with that request, said Harris. The city also would be willing to put up a fence



RENEÉ HANNANS / Staff

**Checklist:** Contractor Robert J. Soens Jr. checks the Freight Room on Dec. 23 as part of his commitment to give Decatur an estimate of how much renovations will cost. The former railroad depot is closing Dec. 31 as a music venue.

## Depot: Cost of repairs raises question of fate

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between the tracks and the depot.'

The current tenant, Dick Edwards, who's been running the acoustic music venue, the Freight Room, for about three years, is closing shop on Dec. 31. The city's Public Works Department had asked Edwards, who was never able to get a long-term lease from CSX, to repair the deteriorating roof.

"It was not our intent to put Dick out of business, but someone had to take responsibility for the building not falling down," said Menne. "Our major concern right now is to get the building stabilized. It's deteriorating and it's getting to be a bigger concern every day," said Menne.

Robert Soens, a Decatur contractor, has volunteered to give the city an estimate on how much initial renovations to "save" the building would cost. He's planning on having some numbers ready in early to mid-January.

"I'm hesitant to give an estimate because there are so many variables that can drive a number up or down. But just replacing the roof could run \$50,000 to \$100,000," said Soens.

He's also planning to give the city estimates on how much it would cost to move the building and how much it would cost to "bring it up to standard" to use it for a restaurant or a music venue. It has to be improved in many areas, including fire safety and wheelchair access. At this point Soens calls the building "unsafe."

Harris says that if the city gets ownership, enabling it to make the necessary repairs to the building, the city would have to raise funds. But a number of private donors have already expressed interest, and the city also has a transportation grant that could be used as well as a capital fund in its budget.

Menne hopes that the future of the Decatur landmark, which many city residents say they want to keep, will be a little clearer in early 1999.

Whether the structure is repaired, moved or torn down, the current inhabitants, pigeons, roosting under the roof, will probably have to find a new home soon.

Dick Edwards did not return numerous phone calls. A spokeswoman for CSX did not answer a reporter's questions about the property by the time this article was published.

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