



Landmark house

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Robert Diaz, superintendent of Parks and Recreation for the city of Wylie, walks in front of The Birmingham House at Ballard Avenue and Jefferson Street. The city recently purchased the house from the Birmingham Land Trust. Diaz and his staff plan to work on setting rental fees for the structure.

WYLIE

Preserving a legacy

City buys historic Brown house from F.O. Birmingham Memorial Land Trust to keep it open to the public

By MEREDITH SHAMBURGER
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When changes in trust laws forced the F.O. Birmingham Memorial Land Trust to sell its big, familiar Victorian house just north of downtown, the city of Wylie stepped in to preserve it.

The Wylie City Council voted in April to spend \$330,000 to buy the historic Brown house, informally known as the Birmingham House, at 301 S. Ballard Ave.

“When we found out that the trust was going to sell it, it was a little bit of our history that we didn’t want to get lost,” Wylie Mayor Eric Hogue said. “We didn’t want it cut up into offices. We wanted to keep it because it’s part of what we are and part of who we are.”

A piece of history

William Thomas and Mattie Brown originally built a small folk-style Victorian house at the corner of Ballard Avenue and Jefferson Street. Thomas Brown was one of the city’s first aldermen and owned a mercantile shop on Ballard Avenue.

In 1905, the Browns decided to relocate their old house just to the west of its original site and build a grander home. The newer, two-story house — now a Texas Historical Commission landmark — features seven rooms downstairs, a larger room and bathroom upstairs, a turret and fish scale shingles.

The house remained in the Brown family until 1931, when it was sold. After passing through several other families, the F.O. Birmingham Memorial Land Trust bought the home in 1989.

When the Birmingham Memorial Land Trust got the house, it had undergone several changes. The distinctive turret had been removed, and several stained glass windows were replaced by French doors.

Hogue, who was appointed as chair of the trust as part of his official capacity as mayor, says the trust got lucky when restoring the house: They found the original stained glass windows that had been removed.

“They found them boxed up underneath the house,” he said.

In all, Hogue said the Birmingham Memorial Land Trust spent more than \$500,000 in 1989 to restore the house, including finishing out the top floor and replacing the turret.

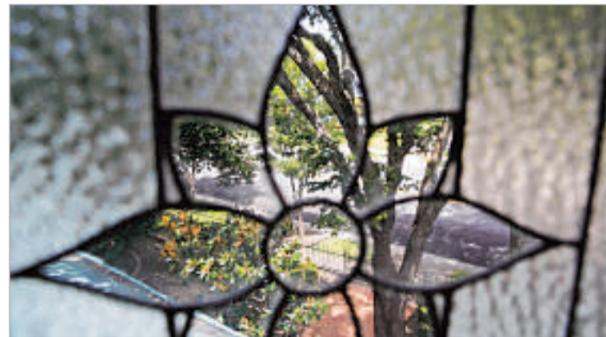
The Birmingham Memorial Land Trust decided to sell the house because changes in federal trust laws meant they would be paying so much every year to keep the house on their books.

“The trust would basically have gone out of business in a decade,” Hogue said.

Because the trust continued to care for the house until it was sold, the city does not need to do any further maintenance or renovation work, Hogue said.

Looking to the future

The city is looking at several options for the house, Parks Superintendent Robert Diaz said.



ABOUT THE HOUSE

The Queen Anne-style house was built at 301 S. Ballard Ave. in 1905 by William Thomas and Mattie Brown. The seven-room structure showcases a variety of Victorian architecture features, including its original fishscale shingles. It is a Texas Historical Commission landmark.

“I think the big emphasis is going to be rentals and having this facility open during special events,” Diaz said. “And then looking at trying to develop some history around the house and having something here that speaks to that.”

City officials are working on the 2015-16 budget, and Diaz said the parks department will consider hiring a consultant to come in and look at what can be done with the house once its budget is set.

Right now, Diaz and his staff plan to work on setting rental fees for the structure. Proposed fees will be brought to the park board and the City Council for approval.

“This is kind of our first step,” Diaz said.

Recreation Manager Carmen Powlen said city representatives have also been touring and looking at similar historic facilities in Mesquite, Dallas and McKinney to see what those communities are doing.

“This is new territory for us,” she said. “We’ve been doing lots of research.”

‘Thankful’ residents

The city opened the house during its Bluegrass festival in late June, offering residents a glimpse at the interior and free watermelon on the lawn. Diaz says the event was a hit, even as the house remains mostly unfurnished.

“People enjoyed looking through the house; I was surprised,” he said. “I got a lot of comments like, ‘I drive by this house every day, didn’t know what it looked like inside.’”

Hogue said the house has always been popular with residents. He’s glad it will continue to remain accessible.

“Even when the trust owned it, you would get people who would knock on the door because they wanted to see the house,” he said. “Saturday mornings, people walk around downtown. They’d like to be able to come in and see it. I’d like it to be open so the public can learn about it.”

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Staff photos by ANDY JACOBSON/DMN

Wylie Mayor Eric Hogue, who was appointed chair of the F.O. Birmingham Memorial Land Trust as part of his official capacity as mayor, says the trust got lucky while restoring the house when the original stained glass windows that had been removed were found in boxes under the home.



The Birmingham House in downtown Wylie includes a music room.