

Buffo's group proposes public-private renovation, use of Flanders Mansion

By MARY SCHLEY

A GROUP devoted to restoring Flanders Mansion and opening it to the public — more than 50 years after the City of Carmel-by-the-Sea acquired it — is hop-

posed a public use there, including proposals that it become a culinary school or a museum. City employees have occasionally lived in it over the years, but it's been vacant for decades. For a period, it also fell into disrepair.



PHOTO/DARREN LOVECCHIO

Mike Buffo (far right) and a group of notable Carmelites have a mission to restore Flanders Mansion and open it to the public.

ing to raise \$2 million and attract people to join the committee that will lead the effort. Carmel Outlands, the organization headed by Mike Buffo, envisions the century-old building being used as a “low-key cultural hub” within a private residence.

Buffo and his family had applied to be resident curators in 2018 when city officials sought proposals from people who would live in and renovate the mansion, but the city council dropped that effort prior to the Covid pandemic.

The fate of Flanders has been debated ever since the city bought it in 1972. Located in the Mission Trail Nature Preserve, the former home is accessed either on foot via the park's trails or by car on Hatton Road, and neighbors have long

Flanders Mansion has also been the subject of more than one lawsuit — including a successful fight to force the city to keep it after a two-thirds majority of voters in a 2009 election decided it should be sold. A subsequent lengthy effort to lease it under numerous conditions imposed by an environmental study failed before the council decided to look into resident curatorship as an option. The mansion's restoration and use have been added to and fallen off the city council's list of priorities repeatedly, and in the 2024-2025 budget, the

council decided again to “explore opportunities for Flanders Mansion.”

Video primer

At last week's council meeting, Buffo and former Mayor Ken White played a video explaining the premise of the Carmel Outlands' 75-page master plan to “restore, maintain and operate Flanders Mansion as a public benefit organization.”

After more than six years of studying the issue and now working with his third group of people interested in protecting and preserving the mansion, Buffo says in the video, “I've learned that the only solution is one that makes this home available

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to everyone.” “This is what the home’s destiny is,” he says. “And this is why the city bought it in 1972.”

Carmel Outlands’ approach, according to Buffo, “is different than every other proposal that’s come before it,” because it would offer “access and enrichment to all.”

The group put together a nonprofit board of directors to develop a fundraising plan, meet with neighbors and pitch its vision to the public. Buffo says in the video the cost of replacing Flanders’ “basic systems” will run \$2 million.

“The funds will enable us to transform Flanders Mansion into a cultural hub that blends exclusive in-person events with unlimited online attendance,” that will help put Carmel’s past and present “onto the world stage,” according to Buffo.

Also in the video, White encourages residents interested in the restoration, maintenance or public benefit programs to serve on the committee.

“We are seeking the village’s most enthusiastic creative minds to help us develop our programs at the Carmel Outlands, and our most connected Carmelites who can help us reach our fundraising goal under our strict timeline,” he says.

Details online

Buffo told *The Pine Cone* the mansion’s public-private use would be balanced by having a caretaker couple live in part of it and an interpretive center established in the other. “Much of the downstairs and half the upstairs would be semi-public. Carmel

Outlands would be on the lease as a curator and would appoint a resident caretaker executive director husband-and-wife team,” or some iteration thereof, he said. “It started with the idea that my family and I would live there, but I came to believe it needs to have some public space. I still hope it will be me, but it will really be the board of directors’ decision.”

According to the group’s website, carmeloutlands.org, once restored, the mansion “will be capable of hosting a variety of activities, including meetings for city support groups, private dinner salons, educational workshops, and community gatherings for a limited number of in-person attendees and an unlimited number of online viewers, all designed to enhance public access and enjoyment in harmony with the residential neighborhood.”

“This approach ensures that the property both preserves its historical significance and enriches the cultural fabric of Carmel-by-the-Sea,” it says.

Buffo and his group, which also includes city council candidate David O’Neil, preservation activist Karyl Hall, former city councilman Gerard Rose and others, provided their master plan to the council in late March and are seeking the city’s OK to embark on a feasibility study.

“We want them to allow us to pursue a public option, to fundraise, to see if there’s a need,” he said. “If we’re not successful, then they’ll know a fundraising option isn’t available.”

And if its vision doesn’t come to fruition, Buffo said, the group would turn over its research, including a detailed look at the mansion’s restoration needs and related cost estimates, over to the city. “To me, it sounds like a no-brainer,” he said.