

City discusses effort to 'Save the Hangar'

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The Liberal Army Airfield is an important part of Liberal's history and soon, some efforts could be happening to make some improvements.

MAAM Foundation member John T. Smith said the efforts have been talked about for a few years now.

"As many know, the Liberal AirFair that will be coming up near the beginning of October, and I know there's been some fencing work done out there and some other

security work at the airport, all of which is appreciated," Smith said. "More than a year ago, when the AirFair was announced and started to be more seriously discussed, we on that committee started meeting and then in the course of all of that, getting everything going. We got to the point of looking at the airport and working with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and City of Liberal administration to find out what it would take for everything to happen. One of the obvious aspects that became apparent was how we've got one of the – at least, I'm going to say – biggest eyesores in town in the hangar at the airport just north of the Mid-America Air Museum. The museum is one of the biggest attractions when people come to town – whether it's as a tourist or visitor, it's one of those places where when you Google what to do in Liberal, the Mid-America Air Museum is at the top of the list. That ties into the AirFair and a few other things, but when they go out there, what they see is that B-24 hangar, and it's got a history. It's a significant part of our community because back then, having that base doubled the town's population in about two years, and it's a very important focal point of our history. That came about and started being discussed along with the AirFair and what kind of an image we wanted to show in terms of what people come to see when they come to the community."

With the shape the hangar is in now, Smith said it not a very good picture for people to see.

“If you're going to have a big crowd on the ramps for an air show, you want everything looking as good as possible. But beyond that, it's about the community history, and people had started talking about it,” Smith said. “Fast-forwarding from last year to about three or four months ago, people started asking questions, and the MAAM Foundation – which, most of you know, is the precursor to the museum, which became a city property/department in the 1990s. The B-24 hangar is also a building on city property, so there's not much initially for people to relate to because they don't have a tie to it, and so the question from the community is what can we do to improve something that's so important and integral to the community's history. In the spring, the MAAM Foundation, hearing these concerns, took it upon themselves to look into what could be done, and that led to conversations with the city manager and multiple other people throughout the past three or four months to where we came up with this discussion and the idea. A lot of people's first reactions is to say 'You can't restore it historically because to make it match original, the costs are prohibitive.' That's a mindset, in many cases, that has some validity to it, but to do work to make something like that useful and do a refurbishment, that's the direction we've come up with.”

The MAAM Foundation then reached out to several places for some recommendations, and Smith said one of those was very close to the area.

“One place we came up with was an architectural firm run by someone who grew up in Garden City and now has offices in Manhattan and Garden City. They had done some work about 30 years ago when the museum was being developed, so they had a connection and interest as well as the talent and ability, so the MAAM Foundation reached out to them to see what could be done,” Smith said. “Where we are now, really, is, we have in the works ... it should be within the next week or 10 days, but we've had conversations with that architectural firm, and they've been to town and seen the building and are working up a preliminary proposal, which we would like to bring to the Liberal City Commission as soon as we get it. It's basically an assessment to recognize the historical importance of the Liberal Army Airfield, professional assessments of the hangar and its condition, possible refurbishment, reuse possibilities, phasing, and costs of what might come out of the committee looking at it.”

At the moment, the project is still in very, very early stages, Smith said.

“We're here as the MAAM Foundation to raise the question about the commission's interest in doing something about this building for the community,” Smith said. “It is a city building on City property, so nothing can really be done without the involvement of City leadership, but I would imagine a project like this, at this point, the discussions would probably lean toward forming a separate committee that would have people focusing on that as a project. We're not here at this point to give any answers or solutions, because we really don't have any – this is about supporting the process to take a look at possibilities of what could be done.”