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## NEWS

### Local artist eyes future of his Hampden mural

BY BENN RAY

A doomed Hampden mural, painted by Owings Mills artist Bob Hieronimus, may get a new lease on life.

The colorful mural, 16 feet wide by 24 feet tall, is on the side of Hampden Hall in Baltimore.

Developers Bob Geis and Joe Preller, who bought Hampden Hall at the southwest corner of Roland Avenue and 36th Street, are converting the building into luxury apartments. They plan to erase the landmark mural, saying it's in an advanced state of decay and unsalvageable.

In fact, in the last full week of August, scaffolding went up as work crews prepared to power spray and repaint the brick on the building.

But now, it appears that the mural will be repainted from scratch, with a grant from the Baltimore Main Streets program.

Constructed in 1882 as a meeting hall for Union Army veterans of the Civil War, Hampden Hall in recent years was one of the few facilities

left untouched by community reinvestment and redevelopment. In the mid-1970s, the city commissioned Hieronimus to paint the mural, honoring the neighborhood's two Congressional Medal of Honor winners, Navy Lt. Milton Ricketts and Army Pvt. Carl Sheridan.

Hieronimus went much further, however, using the mural to honor the Bicentennial and Baltimore's old streetcars (Hampden had the first one in the nation), as well as the two war veterans.

The Hampden Community Council, worried about other redevelopment projects in the community, started a movement to preserve the mural.

But Preller, and the Baltimore City's Office of Promotion and the Arts, told them the mural could not be restored because of the age of the painting and the condition of the brick wall.

Preller said he would be willing to pay the cost of removing the mural and preparing the brick surface for

another mural, if community groups could raise money to pay Hieronimus or another artist to repaint it.

Tracy Baskerville, a spokeswoman for the Office of Promotion and the Arts, said funding for a repainted mural has been secured through the Baltimore Main Streets program. The arts office will administer the \$8,400 grant, she said.

Hieronimus, 61, said he is looking for a surrogate artist to re-create it.

He remembers how dangerous it was to paint the current mural when he was a lot younger.

"I knew when I worked on that wall (that) it was a dangerous wall. It was in bad shape when I painted on it," he said.

The project also brings back bad personal memories because the city's tight deadline and anticipated bad weather at the time made it difficult for him to spend time with his dying father.

"When I think of that wall now, I think of the process of losing my father," he said.

Due to the condition of the brick even then, some aspects of the mural were marginally completed, and he knew that the whole mural would have to be repainted someday to survive, he said.

If Hieronimus' mural is not

repainted, local residents are going to miss it.

"Having something bright and interesting there sets a tone," resident Rebecca Abernathy said. It tells you something about where you are (and it) suggests you're in an interesting place, somewhere out of the ordinary."

"It's an odd duck, this mural," Lisa Harbin said. "It celebrates the bicentennial and war heroes and mass transit. And rainbows. It's quirky but respectful of the hard-working residents of the neighborhood. This kind of mix is what makes Hampden feel like home to me."

The mural is only one of many accomplishments by Hieronimus in his varied career. The Owings Mills resident hosts the long-running WCBM radio show "21st Century Radio," about the paranormal. He also owns Ruscombe Mansion, a holistic health center in the Coldspring Newtown area, and is the author of a book about the making of the Beatles' film "Yellow Submarine."

Hieronimus has painted 30 murals in the area through the years. He said he was shocked to learn only recently that the Hampden mural, on which he had worked so hard, might be coming down.

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