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The News Tribune, Tacoma, WA - Tuesday, March 20th, 2007 3:23 PM

OPINION

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State should help tear down 'haunted asylum'

THE NEWS TRIBUNE
 Published: March 12th, 2007 02:00 AM

The graffiti-covered ruins of Western State Hospital's abandoned Hill Ward Building – the "haunted asylum" – are an almost irresistible magnet for young people at Fort Steilacoom Park.

Built in 1932, Hill Ward was once home to male patients who worked on WSH's farm operation, which was discontinued in 1965. Now what's left of the three-story concrete building is where bored kids go to scare each other at night, drink beer and do other things their parents probably don't want to think about. Last summer it was a hangout for young thugs who assaulted and robbed at least 23 other people.

With its breached razor-wire fences and steel rebar sticking out of concrete, the ruined building is, in legal terms, an "attractive nuisance." And because it is a magnet for bad elements and poses a possible liability problem at a popular regional facility, the park's managers – the City of Lakewood and Pierce County – are right to want to get rid of it.

They have come up with \$100,000 and \$50,000 respectively and have taken care of the permitting and abatement requirement. They want the state – which owns the property – to contribute \$550,000 from the capital budget this legislative session. The money would allow completion of Phase One of the Hill Ward Building Removal and Restoration Project, which also includes restoring the natural surroundings and erecting historical markers to tell the story of the site.

Although the hospital and the remaining farm buildings elsewhere on the grounds of Fort Steilacoom park have historical merit, the Hill Ward ruins do not. The building was partially demolished in 1989 while it was being used as a search-and-rescue training facility. All that's left is dangerous, graffiti-covered rubble, and it should be cleared away as a matter of public safety.

As owner of the property, the state has an obligation to the welfare of those who use Fort Steilacoom Park. That includes the residents of Western State Hospital and their visitors who often walk in the park. The Hill Ward ruins are not far from the main WSH campus and are easily reached on a well-worn path.

Partnering with Lakewood and Pierce County to rid the park of this dangerous eyesore makes sense. The South Sound legislative delegation should support the capital budget funding request.



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