

Thousands awarded to save state's heritage

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More than \$300,000 in state aid is headed for historical preservation projects in northern Rhode Island, bound for old buildings both big and small, from the one-room Belknap School in Johnston to the castle-style armory in Pawtucket.

The money will fix leaky roofs, eradicate water damage, reinforce at least one wall, replace old windows with new wooden ones that won't clash with the old New England aura.

The allocations were among \$1 million in grants that Governor Carcieri announced yesterday morning.

The former Pawtucket Armory and the Pawtucket Public Library each received a grant of \$100,000, which means that historic Pawtucket will reap more preservation cash than any other jurisdiction in Rhode Island this fiscal year.

The other awards included: \$30,000 to the Belknap School in Johnston, \$33,600 to the Borders Farm in Foster, \$29,407 to the Smithfield Exchange Bank in Smithfield and \$9,240 to Scituate Town Hall in Scituate.

Supporters for such grants, including Carcieri, say that preserving historical buildings protects the area's rich heritage and strengthens the economy.

In Johnston, the money should pave the way for the completion of a restoration project that has been in the works for many years.

Built in 1892, the old schoolhouse is nestled atop a hill. It looks down on a thick forest.

Historical research shows that this is the second schoolhouse to occupy the spot since 1790.

It boasts two entrances and two separate coatrooms, one for the boys and one for the girls. It also has a bell tower with an antique bell inside.

The building was the home to American Legion Post 92 for many years.

After acquiring it from the town in 2002, the Johnston Historical Society spiffed it up and repainted its taupe clapboards and green window sashes.

Now, the society will use the \$30,000 — as well as about \$15,000 in other support — to finish off the inside of the school, the society's president, Louis H. McGowan, said yesterday.

The money will pay for a new boiler, a bathroom, floor resurfacing and ceiling re-plastering.

McGowan hopes the work can be finished by the summer. Then, the little building will become a museum of sorts, a place where children can find out what school was like back in the 1890s.

The society has little desks and chairs and historical memorabilia to hang on the walls.

"We're very happy," said McGowan. "We're looking forward to having the kids come through the school and teaching them about the old days and their heritage."

The old armory building on Exchange Street in Pawtucket has been one of the state's centerpiece historical preservation projects for more than three years now.

The Pawtucket Armory Association is in the third phase of an \$8-million project to transform the building into The Arts Exchange, a new center for arts and education.

Rhode Island's Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission calls it "one of the most dramatic, most visible, and most critical projects in the state."

The former National Guard property already houses a high school dedicated to the performing and visual arts, the JMW School. It's also home to the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre.

In large part, the final push involves the cavernous, hangar-like "drill hall," which is due for a remodeling that will turn it into two different spaces. One will be a theater. The other will be a flexible hall for exhibits and functions.

But the more immediate problem concerns the drill hall's 110-year-old slate roof. It's structurally deficient in some places. Elsewhere the slate needs repair.

The \$100,000 state grant will help pay for that work. It will be used in conjunction with \$250,000 in block grants from the City of Pawtucket, said Steven M. Kumins, executive director of the Pawtucket Armory Association.

The association still needs more money to fix extensive damage to the building's masonry.

"As we raise money we will continue to do repairs," Kumins said. "The roof is the most important thing so we're really grateful that the historic commission saw fit to award this grant."

Just beyond the old armory and the Blackstone River is the Pawtucket Public Library. It is a sprawling structure involving several different buildings that have been linked together.

Two of them, the Sayles building and the old post office building, are suffering from extensive water damage. Ceilings are dropping, plaster is chipping and paint is peeling, according to the library's director, Susan L. Reed.

"I think we will be able to fix a lot of that," Reed said.

The repairs are part of a \$663,350 improvement initiative.

Another historical project in the region, the Borders Farm in Foster, received \$35,000 to re-roof an 1840 farmhouse and an old dairy barn.

The Smithfield Exchange Bank received more than \$29,000 in grant support for a \$44,110 project to stabilize a compromised wall. Due to the wall's weakness, the entire building is in danger. The Smithfield Preservation Society envisions the building as a place for public meetings, library archives and an exhibit on chartered banking in the state.

The smallest grant in the region, \$9,240, went to Scituate Town Hall, where the money will help pay for almost \$14,000 worth of new wooden sash windows and sidelights.