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Hoping history is on their side

By Layla Wilder

It's been almost two months since the historic Masonic Acacia lodge in Clifton was severely damaged when heavy rains hit the area in June. Now the Town of Clifton and high-ranking government officials are getting involved in repairs that have yet to be made. There were more than 5 inches of standing water in some places throughout the building that seeped in from nearby Popes Head Creek.

Damage to the privately owned historic landmark, built in the 1800s, is estimated to be around \$200,000. That is money the lodge's members do not have, according to William Baumbach, a member of the lodge's building committee.

About 15 people met July 27 to discuss applying for federal grants to help fix the building. They are in the process of applying for monetary assistance from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for help since the flooding prompted President Bush to declare a state of disaster in Virginia.

Under federal law, the declaration entitled some qualifying government agencies and nonprofits for financial assistance to repair flood damage.

But the Acacia Lodge may not qualify because of "complicated factors," according to Deborah Mills, director of mitigation with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management.

To qualify, Mills said, the organization or agency needs to play "an important part in keeping society functioning."

Though Gov. Tim Kaine (D) asked FEMA to give assistance to individual Virginians affected by the rain, the request was denied and recently appealed, according to a press release.

Baumbach said he thinks the lodge should qualify because "it is kinda like a community center" to the small town of Clifton and is the meeting place for several groups, including the town's government, Clifton's Lions Club and local youth.

Lodge members are seeking proof that their building is used by the community by getting people who use it to e-mail or write emergency assistance officials to prove it, Baumbach said.

"Our building is just used for free, and it's a small town and we do it with a handshake here," Baumbach said.

Wayne Nickum, a member of Clifton's Town Council, said, although the town will do what it can, it probably cannot do much.

"We are supportive of the Acacia Lodge, but it's between FEMA and the Acacia Lodge," he said.

Baumbach has contacted several government officials, including the governor and U.S. Rep. Tom Davis (R-11th), about the lodge and said he has been "very pleased with their initial support."

Del. William Howell (R-28th), Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates, also promised to do what he can, according to Baumbach.

"I hope it means that there will soon be action," Baumbach said. "We have a lot of wheels rolling and turning to fix this, and we hope they don't stop dead in the water."

"We are hoping that they will include in their consideration that we are a historical landmark," Baumbach said.

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