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The Alamo's guardians say the shrine, the site of a siege that came to a climax 171 years ago today, needs repairs.

JOHN GONZALES: CHRONICLE



March 6, 2007, 1:48AM

The Alamo may need a costly touchup

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SAN ANTONIO — Wind, rain and the reverent touches of 2.5 million annual visitors are taking their toll on the Alamo's limestone walls, slowly eroding the landmark where one of the most important battles for Texas independence came to a climax 171 years ago today.

It's nothing at least \$1 million in research and repairs couldn't begin to fix, caretakers said.

Yet, that estimate is "probably a small amount compared to what really needs to be done to adequately handle the site," Texas Historical Commission Executive Director Larry Oaks said Monday.

"This is one where Texans just flat would not give up," Oaks said.

Master plan in works

The Daughters of the Republic of Texas, who have safeguarded the shrine since 1902, are preparing the Alamo's first master plan for upgrades since 1979. DRT officials said they can mitigate the destructive forces of nature and man if they can raise large sums for preservation. They also want to enhance visitors' experience at the hallowed site.

Their plans, due out in May, will call for fresh analyses of the corrosive influences on the shrine. Costly steps may be required to slow the flaking of limestone that dissolves architectural details and historic graffiti from the Alamo facade, officials said.

The Alamo still bears the scars of the 1836 siege in which 189 defenders were defeated by Mexican forces, a rout that spurred the cries of "Remember the Alamo!" at the decisive Battle of San Jacinto near Houston. Chunks of stone are missing due to cannon blasts, bullets and natural crumbling, but even though the flaws could be fixed, the DRT won't do that, Alamo Director David Stewart said.

"People want to see the church pretty much as it was, with the signs of history on the front of it," Stewart said. "The Historical Commission is very adamant about that, also," he said. Even so, there are discussions about restoring part of the Alamo's interior that were reworked in the 1850s, Oaks said.

In its most recent renovation, the Alamo got a new roof in 1999, but since then, there has been no need for urgent action and the structure remains stable, curator Bruce Winders said.

"One of the rules of preservation is to not necessarily do something just for the sake of doing something," he said. The master plan will yield a new assessment of deterioration so caretakers can plan repairs and long-term maintenance, he said.

'Loss of detail'

"The main challenge that we face here at the Alamo is that — it sounds rather crass — the church and the long barrack are a collection of rocks. They have a historic significance, but they do what stone does over the ages, and that is, it tends to erode," Winders said.

Working with the Alamo's preservation architects, the DRT has identified areas of limestone that need attention, but "sometimes being observant and doing nothing is better than doing something that later you find out was harmful and can't be reversed," he said.

"I would imagine that the Alamo itself would be here for hundreds of years. Look at Europe, where they have buildings hundreds of years old. Barring any catastrophe, the Alamo will be here," Winders said.

Still, he said, the Alamo faces "incremental loss of detail on the facade. In the past, in photographs, there was more detail. You can see that today in the graffiti. We have historic graffiti on the front of the church that is being lost," he said.

Despite admonitions to visitors to keep their hands off the building, some do it anyway.

"It gets a lot of touches and feels," Stewart said. "We have 2.5 million (people) coming through saying, 'It won't hurt if I just touch it,' but pretty soon it begins to wear a little bit."

The shrine is gently cleaned to offset mold and human contact, but a costly treatment may be required to address deep-seated oils and salts, Stewart said.

"We have to have antiquities permits from the historical commission and we have to follow the guidelines established by the (U.S.) Department of the Interior for the preservation of historic buildings," he said.

"The work in the master plan — we're probably looking in the \$1 million range to have all that work done," he added.

Relying on donations rather than state funds, the DRT will begin raising monies for preservation once the master plan is released, Stewart said.

"We're going to have a wonderful facility for our great-grandchildren to come visit," he said.

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