

Livestock

New uses increase value of old barns

By JAN COREY ARNETT

TO survive today, many old barns need a new purpose.

A resurgence of the small farm and the popularity of locally grown and organic produce, as well as living history and vacation farms, offer hope for traditional barns to survive for farm use. But what is to be done with Grandpa's barn when no farm options remain?

For the person committed to building "green," barns represent earth-conscious sensibility as homes, offices, classrooms, restaurants, museums, studios, veterinary clinics, wineries, churches, shops, theaters and more. Barns attract curious visitors who then spend money. Some alternative-use barns in Michigan are the Gilmore Auto Museum, Richland; Kresge Foundation, Troy; Ellis Barn, Oakland County; Uncle John's Cider Mill, St. Johns; and the Thumb Octagon Barn, Gagetown. Weddings in barns are popular, as are barn tours.

Barns can be moved in their entirety, in sections, or disassembled. Ken Brock, Legendary Timberworks, Novi, has moved several barns. "The condition of the frame, size, intended use, route, distance, seasonal conditions and position after relocation influence the wisdom of moving it intact," he says. Moving a barn intact re-

Key Points

- Barns can have commercial uses, as they attract visitors with money to spend.
- The structures can be moved in their entirety, in sections, or disassembled.
- When a barn cannot be repaired or moved, salvage may be an option.

quires cooperation with property owners along the route and with utility companies, highway departments and the U.S. Postal Service unless one has the good fortune to cross a frozen field. Disassembly is preferred by some professionals to inspect and clean the frame and to save money. Other considerations are building codes, zoning restrictions and end-use suitability.

Thousands in savings

Clare Koenigschnect, Fowler, moved a 70-plus-year-old barn intact less than a mile and saved thousands of dollars over new construction. Lee and Naomi Peck, Ceresco, with the help of contractor Melvin Stourey, Quincy, repaired two barns for use in their tree business and made a third their home.

Ann Arbor architect Charles Bultman adapts barns, featuring hewn timbers. His advice for barn owners is to repair the



NEW USES: Just one example of a barn converted to an alternative use.

roof to keep the barn dry. He decries the misconception that it always costs a fortune to save a barn.

Ted Micka, owner of The Barn Doctor, Norvell, modifies many barns for new use. "The worst do-it-yourself mistake I see is that people don't understand the real cause of the problem and thus don't fix the real problem. Doors are dragging so they shorten them or grease the rollers, when in reality the wall is bulging, or the post and sill are rotting."

When a barn cannot be repaired or moved, salvage may be an option. Wayne Garber is a Louisiana farmer who specializes in reclaimed lumber. "New lumber is cheaper, but the density, quality, character and rare beauty of old wood make it worth the effort." Garber has harvested barns in three states, including Michigan. But barn owners will not get rich selling barn wood, because salvage costs make paying for a barn prohibitive. Savings comes in avoiding removal expenses.

"Letting a barn fall, be burned or bulldozed is a heartbreak," says Garber. "I'd rather see a barn as a barn."

Tadd Morris, 2nd Chance Wood, Corunna, agrees, "Barns in good shape should be saved. Their value increases as there are fewer of them." If the barn must come down, owners should start months in advance to find a taker, allow two weeks for on-site work and require cleanup. Using barns as fire department training exercises is wasteful and environmentally-unfriendly.

Some owners are discouraged that their insurance agent calls their old barn a liability. Farm Bureau agent Tim Barry looks at a barn's functionality, replacement cost and condition as they would any structure. "Every situation is different." Barry prefers that people keep barns in good repair.

Fortunately, real estate agents are gradually finding that the space, beauty and creative potential a heritage barn offers is appealing to buyers, giving credence to the wisdom of keeping a barn in good repair because its greatest value may lie not in the past but in the future.

Arnett owns Coralan Communications and writes from Battle Creek. You can write her at www.jancoreyarnett.com.

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Arlan Suderman
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