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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Ed Lavalley, City Manager

**From:** Harry Klinkhamer, Historical Resources Manager

**Date:** August 20, 2019

**Re:** Walter Farley Property

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### BACKGROUND:

Walter Farley was a prolific and successful writer. His series of books based upon *The Black Stallion* included 21 titles published between the years 1941-1989. More than 12 million copies of his books have sold in 14 different countries. He and his wife Rosemary were one of the founders of the Friends of the Venice Library. He was a strong supporter of children's literacy and children's writing.

The Farley's had their home built between 1953-1956. They hired architect Ralph Twitchell to design the home. Twitchell is considered the father of the "Sarasota School of Architecture" that created a unique style between the 1940s and 1960s. He incorporated many elements of that style in the house, with Ocala Bricks, Terrazzo Floors, floor-to-ceiling windows, exposed beams, and access to nature. The project included a separate studio attached to a carport that Farley used to write many of the *Black Stallion* books. Jack West would later be hired to design an expansion of the house. This would add more bedrooms and living space to the house. West was also a founding member of the Sarasota School of Architecture.

This property is eligible to be placed on the local register of historic places based upon the following criteria in Chapter 86-28:

- (c)(2)a.1 Are associated with distinctive elements of cultural, social, political, economic, scientific, religious, prehistoric and architectural history that have contributed to the pattern of history in the community, the city, the state or the nation;
- (c)(2)a.2 Are associated with the lives of persons significant in past history; and
- (c)(2)a.3 Embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, style or method of construction or work of a master; or possess high artistic value; or represent a distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

This property is eligible to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places based upon the following criteria:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of significant persons in our past; or

- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

Currently the property is for sale at \$2.3 million and has two MLS listings: one for the whole property and one listing it as vacant land. The Farley siblings are hoping to find a buyer that will restore the house, but are considering all options as they would like to sell the property due to the property taxes. The current bill is over \$39,000.

Two options for preserving the Farley legacy came out of discussions at the August 16, 2019 Historic Preservation Board meeting:

1. Relocate the studio to city property; preferably the Cultural Campus.
2. Recreate the studio at the William H. Jervy, Jr. Venice Public Library.

#### OPTION 1

Option 1 proposes relocating just the studio from the Farley property to a city-owned site, preferably the Cultural Campus.

*Value* – There is no doubt that the connection of Walter Farley, Ralph Twitchell, and Jack West to the City of Venice is one worth preserving and telling. Farley has had an international impact with his writing and Twitchell and West are both known nationally for their architectural accomplishments. However, much of the value of the studio and the story it tells would be lost by relocating it. Relocation is always deemed a measure of last resort in the preservation field. Removed from its context (the property and the home) the studio loses a lot of its meaning. However, having a place to keep original items related to Farley would be a plus.

*Cost* – There are several things to consider when trying to estimate the cost for relocating a building. In the case of the studio it means detaching it from the carport, getting it through the excessive growth along the lengthy driveway, movement of power lines, blocking streets, etc. As James Clinch points out in his email of 8/19, it is a masonry building on a concrete slab with a flat roof and includes the carport and other storage. It could be difficult to separate the studio portion from the rest of the structure. Additionally, separating the studio from the slab foundation is also difficult and potentially damaging. Finally, moving the concrete slab with the building adds greatly to the cost. It is difficult to make an apples-to-apples comparison when moving buildings, but the most recent move of a historic structure was the Green Street Church in Englewood. It was moved by the Lemon Bay Historical Society a mile down the road to a new location. Costs for that were approximately \$200,000. And as James Clinch also points out, there would need to be clarification on ownership, repair, operation, and maintenance. That will impact ongoing operational costs for the studio.

*Practicality* – Before even considering the practicality of relocating the studio, there first must be the opportunity to move the studio. The property is currently owned by the descendants of Walter Farley. They currently wish to sell it to get out of the financial liability of taxes and upkeep. First the studio would need to be either purchased from the current or future owners, or donated by the current or future owners. That will require negotiations between owner and whichever entity looks to acquire it. Any property owner would like to maximize any tax benefits there might be in donating the studio. Then there is all the above-mentioned logistics in moving the studio. Next would be finding an

appropriate place to put the studio. The Cultural Campus has been deemed a logical destination—especially with the library on the campus. In trying to find a suitable location on the campus, it will be important to factor in the impact on parking, green space, and stormwater. In addition, there is also discussion of a museum/storage facility for Old Betsy possibly going on the campus that needs to be considered. And finally, returning back to James Clinch’s concerns about upkeep and operation, there is the challenge of sustainability once it is here. Who is going to take care of it? Operate it? And how?

## OPTION 2

Option 2 proposes recreating the studio inside the William H. Jervy, Jr. Venice Public Library.

*Value* -- There is no doubt that the connection of Walter Farley to the City of Venice is one worth preserving and telling. Farley has had an international impact with his writing. The ability to recreate the interior of the studio within the library would enhance the value of the literary landmark there while not suggesting any false depiction of the real studio that a relocation would do. However, the value of the work of Twitchell and West would be lost. Even if the interior walls were recreated, it would be done more so to set the feel for where Farley worked rather than the accomplishments of these architects. But the recreated studio could be a place to collect, preserve, and display original items from Farley that are currently in the studio.

*Cost* – Recreating the studio in the library would mean that the responsibility for costs to build the replica studio, acquire and preserve any artifacts, and long-term upkeep and maintenance would fall to the Sarasota County Department of Libraries and Historical Resources.

*Practicality* -- Acquiring the items in the Farley studio will be much less difficult than trying to move the whole building onto the campus. There would need to be enough space at the library to recreate the studio and then decide how to utilize it in programming. These responsibilities would fall to the Sarasota County Department of Libraries and Historical Resources.

## OPTION 3

Option 3 proposes repurposing the Walter Farley property as a writer’s retreat/literary center.

*Value* – There is no doubt that the connection of Walter Farley, Ralph Twitchell, and Jack West to the City of Venice is one worth preserving and telling. Farley has had an international impact with his writing and Twitchell and West are both known nationally for their architectural accomplishments. Although there was no option 3 proposed at the historic preservation board meeting, this is a rough idea that I have been thinking about for the site. The National Trust for Historic Preservation strongly recommends that saving a place is just the beginning; a building needs to have a purpose. One way to save the Farley home would be to have an entity acquire, restore, and repurpose the property. Walter Farley was an ardent proponent of children and individuals reaching their dreams through writing and having the proper skills to learn from reading. Having a small, secluded facility that supports that vision could be another way that the City of Venice can tout itself as a unique place. There would be the added value of showing and knowing how a community came together to save an historic place and put it to good use.

*Cost* – The cost to the city would come from primarily two areas. First would be staff time involved to help convene a meeting to brainstorm a more detailed solution for repurposing the Walter Farley

Property—possibly even covering some costs to put on and bring in a workshop facilitator to conduct a charrette. Second, would be the potential loss in property taxes if the Farley property was taken over by a nonprofit. The current tax bill shows that the City of Venice portion of property taxes are approximately \$8,000.

*Practicality* – The practicality of organizing and having a charrette does not seem that out of reach. There are many potential stakeholders that can be invited to discuss ideas for repurposing the Farley property, including:

- Arts and Cultural Alliance of Sarasota County
- Community Foundation of Sarasota County
- Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast
- Education Foundation of Sarasota County
- The Errhart Family Foundation
- Farley family
- Friends of the Venice Library
- Gulf Coast Community Foundation
- Gulf Shores Homeowners Association
- The Hermitage on Manasota Key (particularly the founding director who retires this year)
- William H. Jervey, Jr.
- New College
- Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation
- Sarasota Architecture Foundation
- Sarasota County Department of Libraries and Historical Resources
- Sarasota County Schools
- Venice Area Historical Society
- Venice Heritage, Inc.
- Venice Historic Preservation Board

What comes out of this charrette will define the practicality of moving forward. The property comes with a big price tag and about as much needed in repairs. Then there is operating it. But it would take little investment on the City's part to spearhead organizing this charrette and seeing what a room full of really bright people can come up with.