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Shearer's birthplace in shambles!

Renovation yet to begin despite
approval of funds two years ago

B/N Shearer, Hugh Lawson

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MARTHA BRAE, Trelawny

MORE than two years after the then Department of Local Government approved \$3 million to renovate the birthplace of the late Hugh Lawson Shearer, Jamaica's



Hugh Lawson Shearer

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third prime minister, there is no clear indication when work will begin.

The three-bedroom house located in Martha Brae — less than two miles from the historic town of Falmouth — which was declared a national monument by the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT) about six months ago, is badly in need of a facelift and is showing signs of rapid deterioration.

Robert Montague, who served as the minister with responsibility for Local Government under the last Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) administration, confirmed to the **Observer West** on Tuesday that the funds was approved to renovate the house, following representation from then chairman of the Trelawny Parish Council, Colin Gager.

Montague was however, unable to say, what had become of the allocation.

Efforts to contact Local Government and Community Development Minister Noel Arcsott yesterday were unsuccessful.

And Chairman of the Trelawny Parish Council Garth Wilkinson, who succeeded Gager in March, could not shed any light on the matter.

"I am not aware of it (approval of funds). It wasn't brought to my attention," he said, promising to make checks with the ministry.

Earlier, Gager told the **Observer West** that almost three years ago, the Road and Works Department at the Trelawny Parish prepared estimates for the renovation of the former prime minister's birthplace.

"The estimates came to \$3.5 million and the work included the erection of a perimeter

\$3.5 million to renovate former PM's home

fencing; repairs to the roof, doors, window and flooring; replacing of doors, painting and termite treatment," he said.

Electrical and plumbing works, were also listed among the areas to be addressed.

He explained that the rehabilitation of the house was to position it as a major tourist attraction.

"What we were really looking at was to fix up the house so that tourists would want to come there and see where Shearer was born and where he spent some of his youthful days," he told the **Observer West**.

He added that the council at that time was working closely with the Jamaica National Heritage Trust.

"The (Jamaica) Heritage Trust was very well involved. In fact, they sent persons to look at the building at least two times over the last few years, and their input was taken into consideration when the estimates were being done," he explained.

Executive Director of the JNHT Laleta Davis-Mattis told **Observer West** that the house was declared a national monument based on the its historic relevance.

"We are also looking at all the houses of our prime ministers... once they fall in a certain category they will be declared," she explained.

She, however, stressed that the JNHT is not in a position to fund the repairs at Shearer's birthplace.

Currently, the house which sits on roughly half-an-acre of land, is occupied by a family of five.

It consists of a small

verandah, kitchen, bathroom, and living area, in addition to the three small bedrooms.

One of the occupants, Daniela Gordon, who along with her mother and siblings have been living at the house for almost three years, said despite the need for urgent repairs, she feels "very privileged" to be living at the historic building.

"It's a wonderful experience to be living here. I feel very privileged to know that I am living where a man as great as Mr Shearer was born and have lived," she remarked.

She argued that the relevant authorities should move with alacrity to have the building renovated, noting that the

house could become an excellent tourist attraction.

"On several occasions when we are here, we see tourists stopping in front of the house to take pictures of it. If the house is fixed up, more would come to take photos and many would also want to go inside and look at it closely," she argued.

Geraldine Steele, a 102-year-old Martha Brae resident, agreed that the historic house could become an added tourist attraction in Trelawny.

According to the centenarian, the late prime minister had lived at the house with his grandmother Jestina Lindo and mother Esta Lindo.

She said Shearer left the

community at about the age of 11, after he was awarded a scholarship which allowed him to continue his schooling in Kingston.

The elderly Steele disclosed that she have fond memories of the former prime minister during their childhood days at Martha Brae.

"As a child he was very jovial. He played cricket using sour orange as the ball and a bat made out of coconut limb," Steele told the **Observer West**, disclosing that she used to love to laugh at his jokes and watch his playing cricket.

Shearer was an outstanding labour leader with the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union and served as Prime Minister from 1967 to 1972 and Deputy Prime Minister in the JLP Government of the 1980s. He died on July 5, 2004 at his St Andrew home. He was 81 years old.