

Letting the bands play on

Effort under way to save conjunto music venue.

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Read more: http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local_news/article/Letting-the-bands-play-on-1429338.php#ixzz1PpT4Kg4r

West Side preservationists hope to orchestrate a victory in an online contest offering a cash prize that could help save the longest-running live conjunto music venue in South Texas.

Lerma's Nite Club at 1602 N. Zarzamora St., is one of 100 finalists chosen from more than 250 entries nationwide in the 2011 "This Place Matters" Community Challenge, sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The club, on one end of a five-unit building dating to the late 1940s, was cited by the city last year for code violations and structural problems. The building needs roof repairs and other structural upgrades.

On May 9, the Dangerous Structure Determination Board gave the owner, Gilbert Garcia, another six months to raise funds for repairs. Susana Segura, who has led an effort to save the club, said Garcia, a taxi driver, needs about \$400,000.

"We just have to show that we're making progress," Segura said. "Like with any preservation project, the challenge is funding money."

The online contest provides a \$25,000 prize for first place, \$10,000 for second and \$5,000 for third.

The San Antonio Conservation Society, which nominated the building, has offered a matching grant of up to \$15,000.

Online voting began June 1 and continues through June 30. Only one vote per registered email account can be cast in the community challenge, at the National Trust website, preservationnation.org, under the "Take Action" tab.

"We're up against some really tough competition," including the Astrodome in Houston, said Stuart Johnson, preservation field representative with the conservation society.

Last year, Lerma's received historic designation — a protection the City Council denied another structure, the "pink building" at 1312 Guadalupe St., on Thursday.

That structure, dating to the 1920s, will be razed and replaced with a new building under the Avenida Guadalupe Association's federally aided Promesa Project.

The Lerma's building was added in March by the National Park Service to the National Register of Historic Places. That and a good showing in the online contest could help save Lerma's, said Shanon Peterson, the city's historic preservation officer.

"What I think is really exciting is that so many people are thinking about preservation on the West Side," she said.

While the building's other units have had various uses, from a bakery to a tire shop, the Lerma's site always has housed a nightclub, starting as El Sombrero.

It later became Lerma's under the operation of Pablo Lerma and later his son, Armando, according to the building's national register nomination.

Aside from its Art Moderne features, with rounded corners, octagonal windows and a tiled wainscot, the building has the distinction of having hosted some of the most famous conjunto artists, including Lydia Mendoza and Leonardo "Flaco" Jiménez.

The register nomination describes conjunto as a unique Texan fusion of German and Czech accordion sounds with Mexican rancheras played by migrant farm workers.

In 2009, a vacant 1930s Humble Oil gas station at 1091 S. Laredo St. won the national "This Place Matters" contest, with 26.3 percent of the more than 8,000 votes cast among 10 finalists. The contest did not offer cash prizes that year.

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