



From left, Jake Mackenzie, president of Friends of the Library Rohnert Park, Barbara Mackenzie, Rohnert Park library commissioner, Kyle Torr, city of Rohnert Park intern, and Mary Jane Beccaria, volunteer, look through old photo albums at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

Group aims to preserve artifacts tied to Rohnert Park's early days for future generations

Volunteers and city officials are sorting through photos, maps and city records recently rediscovered in a storage unit and considering ways to preserve and display the items long term.

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Barbara and Jake Mackenzie, with their longtime friend Pam Novelly, weren't sure what they'd find inside the small storage unit that sat behind a shopping center in Rohnert Park, off Southwest Boulevard.

But they knew they'd found something special when they pulled open the doors during a visit in early June.

Stacked to the ceiling of the roughly 4-foot-by-6-foot locker were boxes containing city plans and photos from the late 1950s and 1960s, maps, a replica Liberty Bell that once hung at the city's old headquarters, Crushers baseball memorabilia and campaign signs.



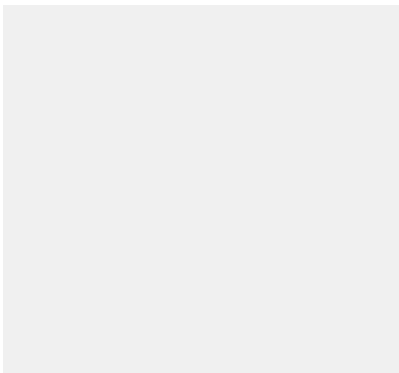
From left, Jake Mackenzie, president of Friends of the Library Rohnert Park, Irene Hilsendager, volunteer, Tim Danesi, volunteer, Pam Novelly, pastor of Faith Presbyterian, Barbara Mackenzie, Rohnert Park library commissioner, Kyle Torr, administrative intern for the city of Rohnert Park, and Mary Jane Beccaria, volunteer, all gather to discover and research historical photographs, maps, documents and other items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

The trio, longtime city residents involved with the library, had embarked on an effort a few years earlier to interview former elected officials and other community leaders in Rohnert Park as part of an oral history project. During that project, they wondered if city documents and other artifacts from the city's early days existed.

Apparently they'd been locked away in the storage unit.

"It was really an, 'Oh my gosh!' moment. I mean, we were jaw-droppingly shocked and thrilled to find these things," Barbara Mackenzie said. "This was what we were looking for, and we didn't even know what we were looking for."

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Jeffrey

What an enjoyable article.

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The items were collected over the last 30 years, donated by some of the city's earliest residents and salvaged from now-gone city buildings by members of the now-defunct Rohnert Park Cultural Arts Commission and, later, the Rohnert Park Historical Society.



From left, Barbara Mackenzie, Rohnert Park library commissioner, Tim Danesi, volunteer, and Kyle Torr, administrative intern for the city of Rohnert Park, examine items and unroll a sign as the group looks through historical items at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

A small group of volunteers had safeguarded the artifacts during that time, but the whereabouts of these items was mostly a mystery. That changed with the recent rediscovery, which stemmed from a chance encounter between Barbara Mackenzie and the unit's renter (more on that in a bit).

The Mackenzies and Novelty, plus a few volunteers, moved about half the items in the unit to Faith Presbyterian Church on Arlen Drive in Rohnert Park, where Novelty serves as pastor. They've spent the past three months sorting through the boxes and taking an inventory of what they've found.

Though Rohnert Park's municipal history only dates back to the city's founding in 1962, the group said it's not too early to begin documenting that history. Now is the time to lean on the knowledge of many of the founding families, people who still live in Rohnert Park today, to ensure the city's history is preserved for future generations.

"This gives us a link to the past."

— local historian and photographer Tim Danesi

The findings were presented to the Rohnert Park City Council in late November, and the five-member council unanimously supported keeping the items rather than donating part or all of the collection the Sonoma County Library.

Now comes the work of finding a way to share the trove of artifacts with the community.



A photo album showing Rohnert Park's 1966 Founders Day Parade, is part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

Mayor Susan Hollingsworth Adams said finding a permanent space for the items will highlight the value of the items and the importance of the work the group has undertaken. She hopes to bring back a discussion item to the council in early 2024 though any long-term solution likely is months or years away.

"I think in order to move forward as a community, we need to know what happened in the past, and the fact that we have access to these records and that they've been preserved as well as they have been is so incredible," she said. "I think the city is ready to match that (effort)."

Collection began in mid-1990s

Around 1995, Ed Grossi, whose family's farming roots are intertwined with the Rohnert Seed Farm and Rohnert Park's early history, gifted a 1934 map of the seed farm to the city's Cultural Arts Commission.

The commission, whose members included local historian and photographer Tim Danesi, framed the map and gave it to city executives, who hung it up at the former City Hall for a time.

The commission took in other donations, and as items trickled in, Danesi became interested in creating a historical society to collect and preserve city artifacts.



Stacks of albums contain photographs, maps, documents and other items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

The Rohnert Park Historical Society formed in 1999. Over the years, they collected city documents and plans, memorabilia from the Redwood Pioneers and Crushers baseball teams from the 1980s and 1990s, programs from some of the early shows put on at Spreckles Performing Arts Center and boxes of photos donated by Reba Roberts, who is credited with giving Rohnert Park its moniker, "The Friendly City."

Danesi — sometimes working as the lone member of the historical society and sometimes with a small group of volunteers — shuttled the items from location to location. For a few years, he stored them in a portable building behind the Crushers stadium just west of where the Costco on Redwood Drive is today. Eventually, they ended up at Expressway Self Storage on Commerce Boulevard.

He occasionally displayed some of the artifacts at the old Hunter Drive library or at city events like the annual Founder's Day Celebration. Meanwhile, he pleaded with city officials for a place to permanently store and display the collection. But plans for a dedicated space were never formalized.

"We weren't really sure what we were going to do with it or what it was going to turn into, but we wanted to make sure the items were in a safe place."

— Pam Novelly

Danesi said that while like-minded history buffs were interested in the collection, it was difficult to get buy-in from the larger public. Some believed it wasn't a worthwhile effort because of the city's young age.

"People would say we have no history, there's nothing to save, and I would say, 'Oh yes there is,'" Danesi said.



A 1964 photo labeled "Press Democrat of Rohnert Park volunteer firemen," is part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

As membership in the historical society dwindled and grant money from the city that helped pay for the storage unit ran out, Danesi in February 2020 sought to pass on the collection to someone else.

At the time, city officials were interested in some of the documents but didn't have space to store many of the items, Danesi said. He feared much of the collection would be tossed out.

That's when Irene Hilsendager, who had been part of the historical society, stepped in.

She didn't have a place to store the items, but she did call Betty Fredericks, wife of city co-founder Maurice Fredericks, who had space available in an office building.

City public works staff helped haul the items to the new location, where Hilsendager sought to catalog and organize the items before the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted those plans.

The collection's whereabouts over the next three years remained somewhat of a mystery to many involved in the early preservation efforts and other city leaders. That was, until that chance encounter in May.



A 1962 photo labeled "Rene Rasmussen as a child, who became Miss Rohnert Park (1879-80) near a flooded Arlen Drive," is part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

Items rediscovered over the summer

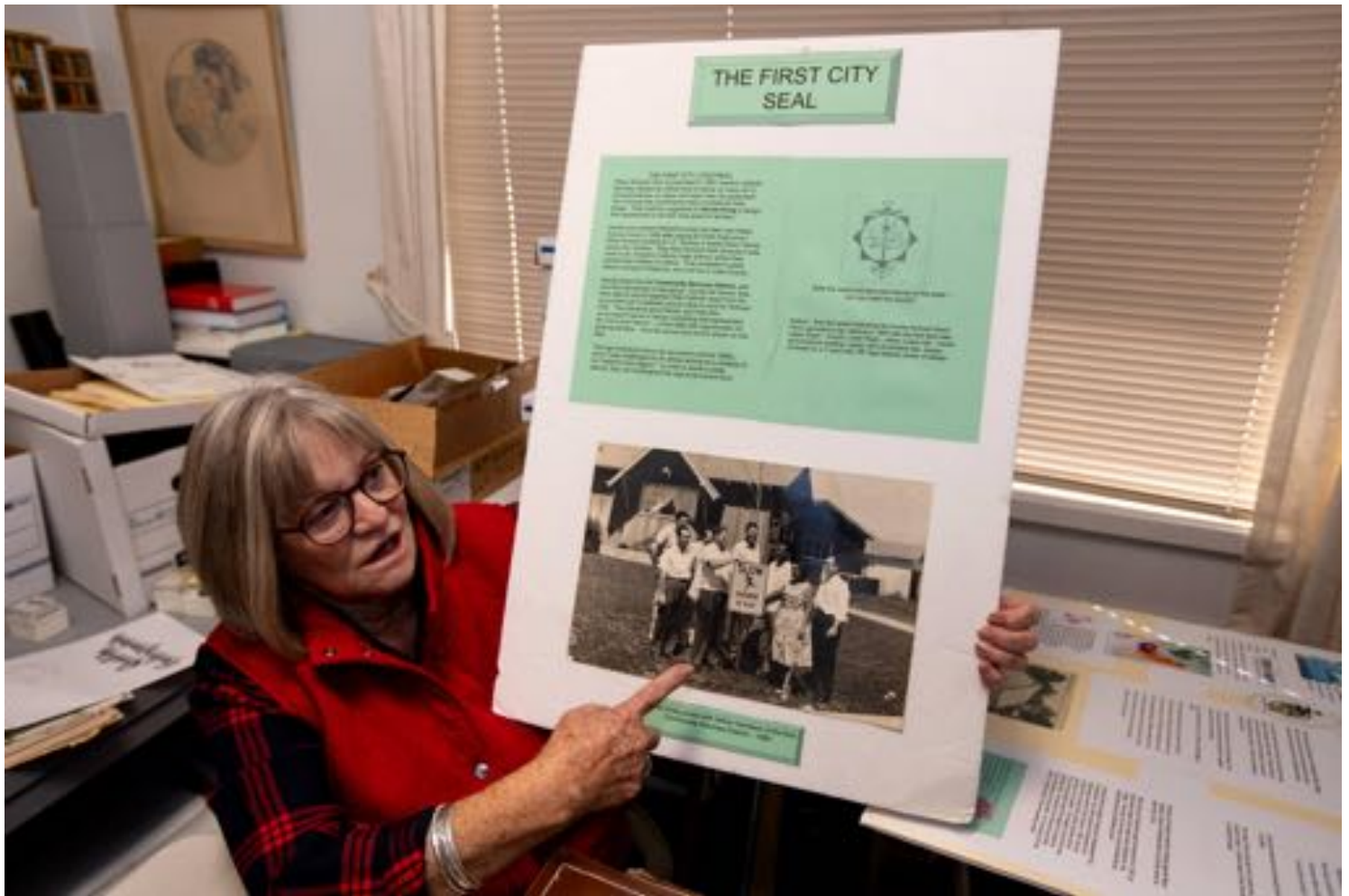
Barbara Mackenzie was at a Memorial Day celebration when she ran into Hilsendager, who approached her with an urgent request.

Hilsendager had relocated the items to the small storage unit off Southwest Boulevard in Rohnert Park and scraped together some money to pay for the storage fee. But now she needed help finding a new home for the artifacts.

"Something needs to happen this year."

— Jake Mackenzie

"It was a completely crossing-of-the-paths, oddball moment because we were collectively interested and thought, well, there must be a bunch of other stuff, you know, somewhere. But where is it?" said Barbara Mackenzie, a Sonoma County library commissioner.



Barbara Mackenzie, Rohnert Park library commissioner, points to a photo that is labeled "Harriet Krieg poses with fellow members of the first Community Services District-1960" on a poster that shows The First City Seal, part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

Barbara contacted Novelty, who offered space in the church. In June, Barbara and her husband, Jake, a former Rohnert Park councilman, Novelty, and two volunteers loaded their trunks with photo albums, cardboard boxes and maps and drove them to the church.

"We weren't really sure what we were going to do with it or what it was going to turn into, but we wanted to make sure the items were in a safe place," Pam Novelty said.

The group approached Don Schwartz, then Rohnert Park's assistant city manager, over the summer seeking to partner on the preservation effort. The city hired Kyle Torr, a master's student at Sonoma State who'd worked on the oral history project, as an intern to help organize the findings.

'Constant discovery'

During a recent visit to the church, the group huddled over a large photo album, carefully flipping through photos depicting smiling young pageant queens glued onto the tattered construction paper.

The city's first and second mayors, Pete Callinan and Vernon Smith, posed in another photo. Boxes containing city documents and posters detailing the city's history were carefully stacked against the wall. Maps and old newspaper clippings sat on a long folding table.



Kyle Torr, administrative intern for the city of Rohnert Park, holds a 1962 poster of the now defunct Rohnert Park Press, part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

For the past three months, the Sunday-school room has served as an office for the volunteers and Torr, who spends about 10 to 12 hours per week combing through the artifacts, culling duplicate items, organizing records into boxes and returning lost photos to their original places in various albums.

Searching through the materials has been a remarkable opportunity for the group, each who described themselves as history nerds.

Pam Novelly said the original seed-farm map, plans depicting the original idea for the master-planned community and a 1968 proposal for a city center are some of her favorite items that have turned up so far. They provide a snapshot in time of what developers envisioned for the area.

"It's a look at what could've been," she said.



A 1934 map of the Rohnert Seed Farm shows individual seed plots by name, part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park. Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

Barbara Mackenzie has found “an endless delight” going through the photos in the collection. Jake Mackenzie said one of the more interesting finds were documents related to an early community services district that existed before the city incorporated in 1962.

Some of the findings have sent the group on new searches, such as a search for a time capsule buried in 1976 at the former library on College View Drive. New items have been donated to the collection, too.

"It's a constant discovery," Barbara Mackenzie said.



A photo showing Rohnert Park's 1966 Founders Day Parade, is part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

Next steps

In early January, the group and city officials plan to move the remaining boxes and other large items, such as bell, a fire hose and a piece of the first city manager's desk, from the storage unit to the Rohnert Park Community Center.

But the long-term fate of the items is unclear.

"I think in order to move forward as a community, we need to know what happened in the past."

— Rohnert Park mayor Susan Hollingsworth Adams

Archival experts with Sonoma County Library and Sonoma State have provided the group with guidance on best practices to safely store the items. But long-term storage and preservation likely will require a dedicated space that is temperature-controlled and free of moisture.

"Storage is not the same as preservation, so that's why we went to the City Council to update them on this effort and get their input," Barbara Mackenzie said.



From left, Barbara Mackenzie, Rohnert Park library commissioner, Kyle Torr, city of Rohnert Park intern, and Mary Jane Beccaria, volunteer, discuss a 1966 photograph showing Randolph Collier, state senator, Pete Callinan, Rohnert Park's first city manager, and Paul Golis, Rohnert Park co-founder, standing near the Rohnert Park Expressway planning a freeway connection near Commerce Boulevard., as the group looks through historical items at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

The group has considered creating a small city history museum, similar to the Cotati Museum housed in the Cotati City Hall or the Geyserville Museum tucked in the back of the Bosworth & Son Store. Also, Rohnert Park city leaders have expressed an interest in displaying some of the items at the city's future downtown site, on State Farm Drive and Rohnert Park Expressway.

Any plan to preserve and display the items likely will require funding from Rohnert Park. The city has allocated less than \$10,000 from the Rohnert Park Foundation to cover Torr's wages and buy storage supplies.



An early 1960s aerial photo of Rohnert Park below, and Cotati, top of photo, is part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church In Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

The group said it will seek a commitment from the city during council goal setting and as part of the budget process.

"Something needs to happen this year," Jake Mackenzie said.

Hollingsworth Adams, who was selected in late November to lead Rohnert Park as mayor through 2024, said she supports the effort and hopes to have additional council discussions in the early part of the year.

For now, residents could catch a glimpse at some of the items during a history day event planned as part of the 60th anniversary celebration of Faith Presbyterian's Arlen Drive location in late February.



An original photo of Randolph Collier, state senator, Pete Callinan, Rohnert Park's first city manager, and Paul Golis, Rohnert Park co-founder, standing together near the Rohnert Park Expressway as they plan a freeway connection near Commerce Boulevard, is part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

Hilsendager and Danesi seemed cautiously optimistic about the renewed interest in preserving the items. But, they said, it will take community support to ensure the artifacts are protected for future generations.

Hilsendager had hoped to find a suitable place to rent with space to catalog and store the items and occasionally open the doors to the public — maybe setting up some sort of diary where visitors could log their own memories of their time in Rohnert Park.



A 1966 photo that shows Rohnert Park's first ambulance and is labeled on the back "Peters and Patton" is part of a trove of historical items showing Rohnert Park's history at Faith Presbyterian Church in Rohnert Park, Friday, Dec. 15, 2023. (Darryl Bush / For The Press Democrat)

She was happy to hear such a possibility is still being considered.

Danesi said he's happy to see that the new city council and city staff are supportive of the effort and said he's glad to see the effort gaining new momentum.

"This gives us a link to the past," he said. "Back then, some people had no interest in supporting historic preservation. But I think we have a new city council and it sounds like they all want to do something about it now, which is great."

Editor's note: This story has been updated to correct the name of the countywide library system, Sonoma County Library.

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