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## Work begins on old Port Columbus terminal



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Construction demolition started at the original Port Columbus airport in Columbus on July 21, 2015. Construction crews started by pulling down the old, mold-infested dry wall and will continue for the next two weeks.



By **Reis Thebault**

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Demolition inside the original Port Columbus Terminal began Tuesday, a two-week project that will prime the 86-year-old building for what many consider a long-overdue facelift.

Workers wearing masks and protective suits started pulling down mold-covered drywall Tuesday morning. That's the first step in renovating the historic structure, said George O'Donnel, a member of the Columbus Airport Terminal Stabilization Fund and its statutory agent.

Workers also will tear down the leaky, dilapidated roof and put up a temporary one, he said.

The building is rife with contrast.

The art deco exterior is iconic. First dedicated on July 8, 1929, the terminal's observation tower is a model of the era's architecture.

But inside, fallen ceiling tiles deteriorate in pools of water created by the leaky roof. Black mold climbs the walls, and moss grows thick on the rotten carpet.

"It's like a greenhouse in here," O'Donnel said as workers tore out the interior.

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Yet, the building's concrete shell is strong and stable. "If this thing were made of wood, it would've caved in a long time ago," he said.

Much of the first floor still has its original red tile — its color still visible through dust, insulation and other debris.

There's still a lot of work to do, but already, workers have filled two huge trash bins with detritus.

The stabilization fund raised \$50,000 and received a matching grant from the Columbus Foundation to pay for the work.

Backers have worked for about two years to save the building that served air passengers until 1958, when the current Port Columbus terminal opened.

After demolition, the site's developer is responsible for finishing renovations, something that O'Donnel predicts will be completed within the next 15 to 18 months.

A tenant — O'Donnel won't say who it is — is applying for historic-preservation tax credits.

A number of businesses have used the old terminal at 4920 E. 5th Ave. since 1958, but it has remained unoccupied for several years now. The building is on the National Register of Historic Places as well as the Columbus Landmarks Foundation's list of the area's 13 most-endangered buildings.

It also holds a special place in aviation history. It's one of the country's oldest standing terminals that's so close to its original condition, said Mark Epstein of the Ohio Historic Preservation Office.

The terminal was a key stop in the Transcontinental Air Transport's path across the country, said Jeff Lafever, executive director of the Columbus Historical Society. At one time, it was the fastest way to get from New York City to Los Angeles.

The day the terminal opened was the inaugural day of Transcontinental Air Transport. Passengers boarded a Pennsylvania Railroad train in New York City, which whisked them to the new Port Columbus terminal, where they boarded a plane that took them to Waynoka, Okla. There, they boarded another train to Clovis, N.M., and then a plane to Los Angeles.

It was the only way passengers could get from coast to coast in 48 hours, Lafever said. Charles Lindbergh was instrumental in the construction of the Columbus airport.

The terminal's hangar also is in dire need of renovation, but demolition there cannot begin until an inspection by representatives of the Ohio History Connection.

O'Donnel said part of the hangar will one day house a museum.

All together, the restored 7-acre property will serve as a tribute to central Ohio's aviation history, he said.

"We've got to do this, it's such a significant building," Lafever said. "We've got to make sure this building is preserved."

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