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Runway project withers a garden - Landmark legacy looks for transplant

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Even now, in winter and untended, the Seike Japanese Garden has what gardeners call good bones: rock paths, teetering pagodas, piling coated with moss. Trees, clipped like green clouds, arch over the banks of a drained fish pond.

But serene it's not.

Every few minutes, airplanes of all sizes roar overhead, and traffic on a nearby highway adds to the mechanical din. In such proximity, the garden has never been able to achieve the tranquility that Japanese gardens aim to induce.

Sold to the Port of Seattle last year to make way for a third runway at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, the garden must go -- much to the displeasure of some in the Highline community, who say it is an irreplaceable treasure.

The 11,000-square-foot garden sits adjacent to the now-shuttered Des Moines Way Nursery, run by the Seike family since the early 1950s. Built in 1962 during the Seattle World's Fair, the garden grew from a nursery display into a horticultural legacy, tended by generations of one of the Highline community's early Japanese-American families, who endured internment during World War II.

"We've had other heritage wiped out by runway projects," said Burien City Manager Gary Long. Long and others from SeaTac and the Highline Botanical Garden Foundation, a nonprofit group that banded to save another garden in the runway corridor, are trying to raise money to transplant the Seike garden a quarter of a mile away to the Highline Botanical Garden in SeaTac.

Port officials have pushed back the initial deadline, from April to October, for selling the contents of the garden. But even with the Port's extension, relocating the garden will be a financial and logistical challenge.

One estimate priced a "restoration quality" move -- cataloging each stone, pagoda and the 212 plants, mainly trees -- at more than $1 million.

Clipped in stylish angles, the weeping maples, flying cherry trees, specimen pines and other trained trees are deceptively small.

"Their roots can extend twice as far as the drip line, which is the outside edge of the canopy," said Mark Tilbe, of Murase Associates, hired by the Port to inventory the garden. Much of the digging would have to be done by hand to separate roots from rocks.

"With the rocks and stuff around there -- there are going to be logistical problems," said Harold Seike, 76, who worries that once moved, the garden won't be cared for properly.

The Port paid $2.7 million for the Seike property, of which the garden was valued at $800,000. It is one of more than 500 properties acquired by the Port for the third runway, expected to be completed in 2008. Some of the property is to be converted to wetlands, but most would serve as a buffer zone.

"The planes are so low, you wouldn't want to be there," said Port spokesman Bob Parker.

Advocates want Port officials to donate the contents of the Seike Garden, as it did a one-acre woodland garden also in the path of runway construction. That garden was deeded for a dollar to the Highline Botanical Garden, where it was transplanted.

This time around, Port officials say they must sell the garden off the land for a reasonable price to recoup part of what they paid for the Seike property.

Parker declined to say what an acceptable offer would be, but he said it must be acceptable to the Federal Aviation Administration, which is paying for the third runway.

"It has to pass a laugh test," he said.

Parker said the Port is bound to sell to the highest bidder.

City officials say they are strapped. "The city of Burien doesn't have any funds," said Stephen Lamphear, Burien city councilman who also is active with the Highline Botanical Garden. "Like every other city, we were hit by Tim Eyman and the economy."

One cost-cutting idea is to transplant the garden in spirit -- choosing some of the garden's elements instead of an exact replication.

"Re-creating it in its exact form is not critical," said Craig Ward, assistant city manager for SeaTac. "I think what is important is creating a cultural recognition of the contributions made by the Japanese community to the Highline area."

Even if parts of the garden are preserved, its passing and that of the Seike nursery will be felt by neighbors.

"It was really nice," said Jarvis Engrum, recalling koi fish in the garden's pond that were "as big as monsters."

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- Caption: photo,mapEllen M. Banner / The Seattle Times : A plane comes in for a landing at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport near the Seike Japanese Garden, which is looking for a new home. (0392845949)The Seattle Times: Uprooting a Japanese garden (G38E68H0)

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