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Editorial from The Tampa Tribune:

STATE OF FLORIDA SHOULD BUY YBOR CITY’S CENTRO ESPANOL

Latin immigrants coming to work in Ybor City’s cigar factories in the late 1800s faced a strange and frightening world. Alligators and wild hogs wandered in from nearby swamps. Suspicious Anglo-Tampans were just as unfriendly.

The newcomers had no source of medical aid, community support or entertainment. But they coped, indeed thrived, by creating mutual aid societies.

The Latin clubs provided social centers as well as medical care and other support.

Through them, cigarworkers could buy medical coverage for as little as 10 cents a week. The centers included clinics, libraries, gyms, dance halls and auditoriums. Separate hospitals were built. Clubs sponsored speeches, plays and concerts, often booking internationally known performers.

As Gary Mormino and Anthony Pizzo point out in "Tampa: The Treasure City:"

"These hospitals and associations offered dignity and hope to immigrants in Tampa - in addition to saving taxpayers millions
of dollars … Without these centros and casinos, cigarmakers would have been mere factory laborers, seeking charity in time of distress. Their Latin pride swelled when treated at modern facilities by their doctors at their clinics."

As the cigar industry declined, so did the Latin clubs. Only five survive, giving faint reflection of the clubs’ former glory.

But all Tampans can take pride in Ybor City’s mutual aid societies’ inspiring achievements. And the clubs warrant preservation in more than memory. The grand Latin club buildings, monuments to immigrants’ pride and self-reliance, should be saved.

Deserving prompt attention is Centro Espanol at 16th Street and 7th Avenue. The National Parks Service recently designated it a National Historic Landmark, citing its striking architecture and historical significance.

Parks Service officials consider Centro Espanol "one of the handful of structures that could serve as essential cornerstones of an Ybor City National Historic Landmark District," a designation that would greatly bolster Ybor City’s revival efforts.

Local officials are trying to persuade the state to buy Centro Espanol through its Conservation and Recreation Lands Program. We strongly support its purchase - if it can be obtained at a sensible price.

The building is privately owned; club members found it too costly to maintain and sold it a few years ago. It remains unoccupied and in disrepair. What makes the building distinctive - a ballroom with musician gallery, theater, marble staircases and such - also limits its potential commercial use.

But Centro Espanol is well suited to public functions - concerts, art displays, education programs and such. The building would complement the appealing Ybor City State Museum.

Communities throughout the nation are discovering the economic value of heritage tourism. Not to take advantage of Ybor City’s unique history by preserving important structures such as Centro Espanol would be foolish. Parks Service officials consider Centro Espanol "the brightest jewel among the extraordinary" ethnic clubs of Tampa.

Of course, Ybor City’s success involves more than safeguarding bricks. Developments that create a broad spectrum of jobs are needed. Ybor needs more developments like Tampa Electric’s new $10 million data center and the proposed, huge furniture-sales complex, as well as tourist-oriented businesses.

Property speculators also must stop viewing Ybor City as the path to quick riches. Asking exorbitant prices for buildings requiring extensive renovation discourages potential Ybor City investors. And private enterprise is the key to Ybor City’s resurgence.

Community leaders have puzzled for more than 40 years about ways to rekindle Ybor City’s economic flame. Experience has demonstrated government’s limited ability to act as catalyst. But the state can help immensely by buying Centro Espanol, an irreplaceable "jewel" from Ybor’s storied past.