

# 'This clock means so much to people': Restoration is starting on downtown's Ayres clock

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After climbing up scaffolding to 29 feet above the sidewalk, John Klinkose pulled handfuls of rust out of the inside of the iconic Ayres clock and put it into a bucket.

“There’s really a lot of work to be done,” he said.

Repairs on Indianapolis’s beloved Ayres Clock began Aug. 21 as crews constructed scaffolding at the southwest corner of Washington and Meridian streets. The scaffolding allows local craftsmen Klinkose and Brose Partington

to reach the 8-foot-tall, 10,000-pound clock mounted onto the walls as it undergoes repairs to restore its luster.

Klinkose, an artist conservator working on the clock, said the bottom of the clock had built-up debris, including cigarette butts and french fry containers he suspects were left by electricians. The debris blocks the drain holes at the bottom of the clock's casing, causing water to build up and damage the metal.



While the bronze encasing the clock has turned a bit green over time, Klinkose said it just needs a good scrub. The tough part will be the water damage and rust on the steel armature or frame inside the clock.

“The armature is the bones. The bronze is the skin,” said project manager Paul Smith. “If there’s damage to the bones, that’s something that’s trickier to fix.”

Smith said the bottom of the armature had rusted quite a bit and would need to be replaced.

Klinkose is now cleaning the clock, scrubbing off rust with his hands. The next step will be cleaning with soap and water and maybe using sandblasters after that.

The crew plans to replace the armature with stainless steel so that it won't rust as easily. They also plan to hot wax and buff up the clock. Klinkose is taking a look at the patina, the green or brown film on the surface of the bronze. At some point, someone added a green color to the patina, but Klinkose wants to restore its brown hue.

In the meantime, craftsmen from Smith Bell and Clock Service removed the clockworks, including the clock's four faces and dials and are storing them while the case is restored.

## **The history of the Ayres clock**

The Ayres clock has been located at that corner since 1936 and was named for the L.S. Ayres department store that occupied the historic building the clock is attached to for most of the twentieth century. The May Department Store Co. bought Ayres in 1986, and the store closed in 1992.

“Ayres was such an iconic clothier,” Klinkose said.

Smith said Ayres was the predominant department store in Indianapolis for decades, and many residents have cherished memories of going shopping there and getting chicken velvet soup at the tearoom afterward.

The clock itself also became much more than just a timepiece, he said. Instead, it's an iconic landmark. “Meet me under the Ayres clock” was a known saying as the clock became a gathering place for people to meet.



Klinkose remembers meeting his grandma for lunch under the clock. He said the clock itself is a beautiful example of 1930s architecture and was made during a time when people didn't carry watches and relied on public clocks to tell the time.

"This clock means so much to people," he said. "It's part of our history."

Smith said seeing the clock open and without its clock faces is a rare sight. The last time people were able to see the clock open was in 2016, when Smith launched a first round of restoration after people had told him that the clock had stopped.

The 2016 repairs including replacing the motors, switching from analog to digital, replacing the dials and four faces of the clock and fixing the backlighting on the clock.

"For the first time in a year or so, all the faces were showing the exact same time," he said.



But during the 2016 restoration, Klinkose noticed the rust on the clock and that it was leaking water.

“That’s when we realized there were serious problems,” Smith said.

While the city of Indianapolis owns the clock, Indiana Landmarks is leading repair efforts and financing through fundraising. In 2016, more than 350 people and organizations donated \$60,000 in just 24 days.

“I’ve never had a fundraiser that we’ve had to call folks up and say ‘Stop sending us money.’” Smith said. “This is how much this particular project pulled on the heartstrings of Hoosiers.”

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Smith said they're still waiting on estimates based on an engineer's assessment of structural damage, but this phase of repairs is expected to cost around \$65,000.

## **The clock will be ready for the cherub**

Klinkose said they originally expected the project to take four weeks, but judging by the structural damage to the clock, it may take closer to six to eight weeks.

“But we really have a drop dead deadline,” Smith said. “And that’s Thanksgiving of this year.”

Smith said the crew plans to have the clock repaired in time to welcome the bronze cherub that appears on the clock each Thanksgiving eve to announce the holiday season’s arrival. Since 1947, the legendary cherub has faithfully watched over holiday shoppers from Thanksgiving through Christmas.



The cherub was designed by the artist Virginia Holmes, who worked in the L.S. Ayres department store's advertising department. Holmes created the cherub for the store's annual Christmas catalogue, and it quickly became beloved by customers.

Ayres then commissioned Indianapolis sculptor David Rubins to create a 36-inch-tall bronze cherub to perch atop the Ayres clock. When employees placed the cherub on the clock the day before Thanksgiving in 1947, it created a sensation and a tradition.

When the department store closed, the cherub was moved to a Saint Louis warehouse, and the clock suffered a lonely 1992 holiday season without its cherub. After an anonymous group called Free the Cherub distributed "Free the Cherub!" bumper stickers, made hundreds of calls and sent letters to local newspapers, the cherub returned that December.

"I don't wanna be the guy who has to call the mayor and say, 'Hey mayor, we're not going to be able to get the cherub up this year,'" Smith said.

Where the cherub lives during the rest of the year remains a mystery, and few know how the cherub appears atop the clock each year. But Smith said he has reached out to the cherub's caretakers to offer the tiny angel a spa day. Now, the cherub will be cleaned along with the iconic clock.

"We're hoping that wherever the cherub is that it understands that we're looking out for him or her," Smith said.

If you are interested in donating to the restoration project, you can visit the Indiana Landmarks donation [website](#) and note the Ayres Clock in the donation form. You can also call Indiana Landmarks at 800-450-4534.

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