

Muscogee school board puts old industrial high school up for sale

Preservationists hope a buyer will restore the 1906 building

By TIM CHITWOOD AND MARK RICE, March 25, 2013

A landmark Columbus school building that went from a national model for industrial education to one of the most imperiled historic buildings in Georgia is up for sale.

Seven years after Columbus' old Industrial High School celebrated its 100th anniversary and one year after the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation named it to a list of 10 "Places in Peril," the Muscogee County School District is putting the elaborate 1112 29th St. building on the market, declaring it surplus and ready to sell.

Superintendent John Phillips said a prospective buyer yet unnamed has shown an interest in it, and may make an offer after it's appraised.

Myles Caggins, the district's chief of operations and facilities, said bringing the structure up to current building codes would cost the system \$7 million.

Though the district's abandoning plans to fix up the three-story building, preservationists hope this means it can be restored for reuse.

The school board held a called meeting Monday to declare the property surplus. The Historic Columbus Foundation hopes that will spur the building's revival.

"That just means that they've recognized the fact that they don't have a future use for the building, and that it may be better off in the hands of someone else, who hopefully can renovate and maintain it," said the foundation's Justin Krieg.

Completed in 1906, the secondary industrial school then was unique in the United States, its creation driven by concerns the children of millworkers faced dim futures without schooling and vocational training.

When little, the kids were occupied toting lunches to their millworking families, sometimes walking miles on the errand. As soon as they gained the stamina, they went to work in the mills, too. For the youngest children, Columbus first started a primary school. "Truancy was almost unknown as interest of the pupils and the work was keen," Nancy Telfair wrote in "A History of Columbus, Georgia, 1828-1928."

But their interest ended there. Few pursued any education beyond that level.

Fearing no further training would relegate workers to low-level jobs and cause a shortage of skilled mill operatives, industrialist G. Gunby Jordan and philanthropist George Foster Peabody helped lead the effort for a secondary industrial school.

Jordan and son Curtis donated the land, and they, Peabody and other benefactors donated funds. The three-story brick building was finished Oct. 1, 1906, and on Dec. 10 of that year the school opened, offered instruction in carpentry, blacksmithing, textiles, typewriting and other business skills.

On March 12, 1937, more than 1,000 students marched from the 29th Street school to 3200 Howard Ave., where a new Jordan Vocational High School opened. The old industrial school became home to the Columbus Junior High School, from 1939 to 1978.

It housed the district's Academic Success Center starting in 1991, according to Ledger-Enquirer archives.

Former students celebrated the building's 100th anniversary in 2006.

The property still houses Academic Success Center's vocational classes, but that program ends this year.

It's also home to the Sara Spano Clothing Bank. Caggins expects the clothing bank will relocate later.

In November, the school board reprioritized the list of school sales tax projects voters approved in 2009. It decided to cut the Academic Success Center program.

The district faced a shortfall of \$40 million in expected sales tax revenue. It had hoped to raise \$223,155,784.

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