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## Northeast : Current News

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### District still trying to entice tenants for recently-closed schools

Written by Gail Olson

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What to do with empty school buildings? After the Minneapolis Public School board closed six school buildings in the last two years and another six—five on the North Side and one in Southeast—at the end of last school year, the district has an excess real estate problem.

On May 22, the board voted to hire Urban Design Lab (North Side architect Paul Bauknight is the president and CEO) and J.B. Realty to come up with a strategic plan for each of the properties.

In the meantime, school board member Tom Madden said that might not be the end of the school closings. "The last round of closings was part of the North Side Initiative. We still have more buildings than we need." He added that projected enrollment for the 2007-2008 school year shows another large drop in North and Northeast and a small drop in Southwest.

He said that he knows some of the buildings, such as Holland School in Northeast, have been sitting empty going on three years now. "I'd be furious if I lived near a closed school. Nobody wants that, they want something done with the buildings. We've got to move on this, and we can't sit on all these buildings."

MPS Director of Planning and Facilities Dan Hambrock said Urban Design Lab will be coming up with a strategic plan to follow for each of the properties. "They will not be dealing with the disposal process," he added.

The final building list might change if they find a use for some of them in the meantime, he added. So far, Friends of Hope Academy has purchased Philips School (the former Mt. Sinai Hospital) in South Minneapolis.

The school district is using Webster Open School, 425 5th St. NE, for administrative offices; it houses special education, psychologists, social workers and the multi-cultural department. A part of the building is reserved for a professional development center.

The City of Minneapolis is leasing Hamilton School in North Minneapolis to house its regulatory services department, Police Athletic League offices and the police department's STOP program.

In Northeast, Putnam School, 1616 Buchanan St. NE, and Holland, 1534 6th St. NE, are closed. In North, recent closings (at the end of this school year) include Shingle Creek, North Star, Jordan Park, Lincoln, W. Harry Davis Academy, and Franklin Middle School. In Southeast, Tuttle School will close.

Hambrock said the school board needs to develop some parameters of what it will and will not accept. "The last time around, there were guidelines based on the viewpoint that the buildings might be valuable, and the marketplace might find them interesting."

The previous search to find lessees, however, was not particularly successful. Only one group showed interest in Holland, for instance, and after several talks with district staff and one community meeting, the group cut off contact with the district.

"Last time, the vision was maybe not feasible. You don't have a theater arts building in a modest residential neighborhood without some sort of zoning change, for instance. I think in many cases the buildings are just too big and their locations are not where people want to be. Most are nestled into neighborhoods, where zoning and regulations won't allow businesses. We also didn't allow charters or private schools, which would have been the easiest ones to put in these buildings."

Hambrock said the district demographer reports that the number of children is declining in Minneapolis. "We're not reproducing our population. Home ownership in the city is one of the highest in the nation for single occupants; 40 percent of the households are occupied by a single person living alone. In Minneapolis, we have smaller houses, many with two bedrooms. While they used to be inhabited by large families, they aren't considered big enough for families anymore."

Hambrock said the board is expecting Urban Design Lab and J.B. Realty to be finished with their analysis in early fall.

Kou Vang, of J.B. Realty, said that Bauknight brought his company in to do the asset analysis of the buildings and determine potential uses. "We're so early in the process, just data gathering at this point. We have to follow chronological steps and look at different factors."

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