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Fresh future for old Columbus school buildings

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An unlucky 13 old-timers in the Columbus school district have been told to pack their things. Four are elderly and will be demolished and replaced. Nine were let go last month because of low enrollment. But instead of selling off schools, which in the past has left a slew of dead buildings and dismayed neighbors, five of the nine will be spruced up for lease. Three others will be reborn as other district schools, and the last will provide temporary school space during renovations.

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The district's plan is a relief to residents, some of whom have watched a boarded-up school building for years.

The old Bellows School, nestled at the intersection of Rt. 315 and I-70, has fallen deep into disrepair since the district closed it in 1982, said Carol Stewart, who heads the Franklinton Area Commission.

“They sold it to a private party fairly soon after they closed the school. It was a really lovely school. But the private party that owns it now has just let it deteriorate,” she said. The building has been the victim of fires, vandals and roof collapses.

“I think it’s smart for Columbus City Schools not to sell off all its buildings,” she said. “It would be more wonderful if (Bellows) had remained a functioning building.”

The owner said he has tried to develop Bellows, but options are few because the state plans to take the property for a highway project.

Since the early 1970s, when Columbus’ peak enrollment of 110,000 students began to decline, the district has closed about 70 buildings. Most were closed in the 1970s and ’80s, when students fled in droves.

“The district literally just sold all those properties,” said Carole Olshavsky, who oversees buildings and construction for Columbus schools. “Several of those are big, old, vacant buildings now.”

When the district began planning its 15-year-long construction project in 2002, it was clear that communities didn’t want a repeat of the 1970s and ’80s. That’s when the district put on its Realtor hat and stopped putting so many schools out to pasture permanently.

Columbus is looking to lease out more than the five schools shuttered last month. Six previously closed buildings are ready to be leased. And 10 closed schools already have agreements with education-related groups, including three charter schools, that will create about \$500,000 in income this year. Mothballing the buildings would have cost as much as \$40,000 a school, each year, for maintenance.

Only one school, the Northeast Career Center, has been sold since 2002. One more, the Northwest Career Center, was declared surplus property late last month and put on the market.

Hanging onto retired schools is increasingly common in urban school districts, said Barbara Worth, director of strategic and private development for the Council of Educational Facility Planners International. The professional

organization for school planners is based in Arizona.

“The trend is to keep them. Schools anchor communities - ask any Realtor,” Worth said.

Urban districts hope buildings they keep will someday again become neighborhood schools, she said. Also, the shaky economy makes selling them at a good price nearly impossible.

Olshavsky said there also have been times when the district closed a school only to need it years later as the district’s population shifted. A good example is Lindbergh Elementary. The West Side school was closed in 1982 but given new life in 1991. It’s still open.

The old Northgate Elementary on the North Side, which the district closed as a school more than 20 years ago, was repurposed as an office building and conference center. Northgate is likely to become a school again in the next couple of years.

“I don’t have a magic number for how many we need to hold on to. ... We’re trying to hold on to ones that we think would be particularly good school sites in the future,” Olshavsky said.

Closing the nine schools will save the district roughly \$5.4 million in operating costs.

The district has deactivated so many schools in the past few years that officials have it down to a science, said Steve Vargo, the district’s interim chief operating officer. Shutting down a school that served Columbus students for decades can take less than one week.

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