

Winterville School Plan Talk of Town

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WINTERVILLE - The historic Winterville School might become government offices, a senior citizens community center or home to the city's library.

HISTORIC SCHOOL

► **What's been done:** In September, the Winterville City Council agreed to spend \$1,440 for an asbestos inspection. The restoration committee solicited quotes from architects, who incorporated in their plans how to deal with the asbestos and lead paint that turned up in the inspection.

► **What's happening now:** The committee narrowed down the architectural firms from seven to three, and will meet with the firms Nov. 18-19. After reviewing their quotes and plans, the committee will select a firm Nov. 20.

► **What's next:** The restoration committee will work on grant applications and begin making plans for weatherproofing both buildings and replacing their roofs. The auditorium will be renovated first, as it is in the best condition, and its future use is decided.

"Everybody's been talking about this project for years, and we wanted to hear what the citizens of Winterville really want from this space," Jo Mercer said as citizens gathered Thursday to tell her and other members of a restoration committee what they see as the future of the school. "I wanted them to think past what everyone has said before, to be practical but also think outside of the box."

Some people want city hall moved into the renovated school, they told members of the restoration committee.

The current city hall is an old market building with about 200 square feet, estimated Mayor Jim Mercer, who is Jo Mercer's husband.

"Instead of saying city hall, why don't we call (the school building) a municipal government property?" said Winterville Wayne Gabriel. "We could have city hall, the police department and the library all in one building."

The 9,000-square-foot building, acquired this summer along with an opera-style auditorium, is large enough to accommodate offices, a courtroom and city council chambers.

One of the more practical uses for the school building on North Church Street might be housing the Winterville Library, which is part of the Athens Regional Library System.

The library is squeezed into a 1,500-square-foot building, so cramped that the city is allowing the Friends of the Winterville Library to begin selling books in the tiny house city hall once occupied.

Along with general meeting spaces, a health center, an all-purpose artists' venue and a community center, the old school could become a historical museum with the building restored to its former purpose, perhaps spotlighting its use in the 1920s.

Councilwoman Mary Quinn included the school on a walking tour of Winterville's historic district this fall, and in preparing for the tour, created a history of the town that needs a home.

"Mary has accumulated stacks and stacks of historical data on the history of Winterville that needs a place," Jo Mercer said. "The school would be an excellent place to house the history of our city."

Some of the proposed uses might even bring the city a little money.

Grants may be available to turn the school building into a senior center, according to Committee Chairman Bob White, a place that could host meetings, computer classes and workshops on canning, knitting or other crafts.

The committee is considering residents' suggestions to turn the school into a place for learning and continuing education.

University of Georgia adjunct professor Harriet Allison struggles to find places where her education students at UGA can get experience.

"I'm drifting toward the different possibilities to do education-type things," Allison said. "That includes everything from a senior center and computer classes right on down to the kids and after-school tutoring."

Committee members are entertaining ideas of housing a consignment or thrift shop in the school building, in part because they can apply for certain grants if the building is used to serve low-income people.

But they rejected one group's suggestion - a coffee shop - because the city won't lease any of the school as retail space. The city might allow people to rent part of the building for weddings, meetings and other events. The school building's cafeteria could become banquet hall and could better accommodate public hearings and forums than the Winterville Depot or tiny city hall.

If planners relocate existing services and offices - like the library or city hall - to the school building, it would free up other buildings in the city square.

But those types of changes are a long way off.

"This isn't going to happen tomorrow," White said. "First, we want to try to stop the deterioration of the buildings."

The dilapidated school needs major repairs from the roof down. Committee members caution that the historic school can't be used in some ways - like for a functioning school or day care - because both buildings contain lead paint, and removing all of it isn't practical. Asbestos abatement is planned for both buildings, but the committee hasn't yet decided how to take care of the lead paint.

One thing is clear - the 450-seat opera-style auditorium will be restored for its original use, with a few upgrades like audio/visual equipment and a screen for showing family-friendly movies.

"I think that auditorium is going to be the next torch that's going to light up the area," Jim Mercer said. "It will be one of the best things that can happen to Winterville."

The auditorium is the logical first rehabilitation project, said Jo Mercer, as it's in the best shape and will require the least amount of work to restore. Committee members hope that the completed auditorium will drum up funds to complete the restoration of the school.

"Whatever we do, I think that it's an important thing that when we get to the end of this, it's something every member of the community can be proud of," said committee member George Chandler.

A second forum will be held in January before the committee determines the future of the historic school. Citizens who couldn't attend the public forum can submit their ideas for the school building to winterville@charter.net.

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