

Winterville pays \$1 for school

Buildings in city's hands

By Jennifer Johnson | news@onlineathens.com | Story updated at 9:16 pm on 6/10/2009

WINTERVILLE - City leaders signed an agreement Tuesday with the Clarke County Board of Education that deeds the historic Old Winterville School and auditorium back to the community.

The defunct high school and its championship basketball team were a beacon of community spirit in the 1950s, a fact that didn't escape Winterville Mayor James Mercer as he signed the contract.

"Ladies and gentleman, we now own a piece of the history of the city of Winterville," Mercer said.

The property was home to the Winterville School until the Clarke County and Athens school systems merged in 1956. School district leaders closed the school soon after, and the city began to use the buildings to host plays, recitals and the Winterville Marigold Festival's annual beauty pageants.

The two buildings, among the city's oldest, fell into such disrepair over the years that school district officials no longer trusted the structure enough to use it for storage. Although weather damage and disuse have taken their toll, the Winterville City Council on Tuesday was quick to approve the contract that pays \$1 for the 1.73-acre parcel of land.

"We actually got more property than we originally requested," Mercer said.

The contract will be approved by the Clarke County school superintendent and attorney before the board hands over the deed to the property off Church and Winter streets in Winterville.

The offices for the Northeast Georgia Regional Education Service Agency, an educational group that allows 13 Athens-area school districts to share instructional services, are on property next to the Old Winterville School. The group also may buy that land from the school board for \$1.

Interim Superintendent James Simms and Ted Gilbert, associate superintendent for district services, worked hard to pull the deal together, Mercer acknowledged Tuesday.

School and city leaders have worked for a decade to put the two-story white brick building and its auditorium back in city hands.

Next, city leaders will need to obtain insurance for the property, according to Councilman Mark Farmer. An unoccupied location may cost more to insure, and funds to pay the premium are not in this year's budget.

City leaders haven't discussed plans to renovate the weathered buildings, but that hasn't stopped Winterville residents from looking forward to its re-emergence as a place for community events.

"The Winterville School will mean so much to the community," said Martha Beach, who has attended nearly every council meeting since moving to Winterville 14 years ago. "The city has no real community center. Hopefully, this will be it."

Originally published in the Athens Banner-Herald on Thursday, June 11, 2009