

URA helping city school board sell empty buildings

Thursday, January 08, 2009

By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09008/940327-53.stm>

What could the future be for 22 empty school buildings during a recession in a city that has been draining of people for half a century?

The Urban Redevelopment Authority has taken on the challenge of finding out by becoming the school board's real-estate agent, Kyra Straussman, the URA's real estate manager, told about 50 community advocates yesterday at the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group's lunch-and-learn session at the Hill House.

Paul Gill, the school board's outgoing director of operations, said the unused buildings -- a few are partially used -- cost the district \$2 million a year.

"There is some urgency that these buildings go back on the tax rolls," said Ms. Straussman.

One goal is to head off highest-bidder auctions in neighborhoods where community groups have solid and realistic plans for the buildings, she said. She admitted "there are just a handful I'd consider marketable."

She said the URA will "evaluate development proposals" for the school board using the criteria it uses in evaluating all project ideas: whether the project fits into the community plan, whether the community was part of the discussion and whether the developer has experience and the means not just to buy but maintain the property.

In an August letter to the school board, the investment group's outgoing director, Steve Shivak, implored them "to delay a decision to authorize an auction company to sell your properties until public comment is heard and neighborhood groups [are] consulted concerning potential reuse strategies and buyers."

One school with a promising future is Morningside Elementary on Jancey Street, in part because of the neighborhood's planning effort, said Ms. Straussman. The Morningside Area Community Council "came to us with a plan already in mind." Late last year the URA put out a request for proposals on that building, and proposals are still coming in, she said.

Joe Kramer, a board member of the Morningside council, said the strongest among several plans is for residential restructuring of the 1897 building, a Richardsonian Romanesque.

"Pittsburgh has some of the most beautiful school buildings in the country," said Ms. Straussman, "but in weak-market neighborhoods, even in strong ones, we have formidable challenges."

The successful transitions of school buildings will have to be market-driven, she told the ground troops of nonprofit community development. The harsh facts include that "\$175 per square foot is not an unusual cost for rehabilitation."

The school board's collaboration with the URA does not obligate it to defer to URA and neighborhood interests if it chooses to auction a school off, she said.

Diana Nelson Jones can be reached at [djones@post-gazette.com](mailto:djones@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1626.

First published on January 8, 2009 at 12:00 am