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Shuttered schools open window of opportunity

By Jeremy Boren
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Morningside lost the closest thing it had to a town square when its elementary school closed.

But there's hope of filling the city neighborhood's core with new apartments thanks to a first-ever partnership between the Urban Redevelopment Authority and Pittsburgh Public Schools.

The two are marketing 18 vacant school buildings to developers interested in putting in apartments, office space, stores and even charter schools -- all of it with the goal of shedding nearly \$2 million in annual maintenance and utility costs the district spends on aging buildings.

"It's 33,000 square feet of space in our business district ... and the opportunities of that space are as big as the property," said Grant Ervin, 31, of Morningside, who volunteers as the neighborhood council's planning and development director. "Folks are really excited about getting engaged and making this school something viable in the neighborhood."

The URA invited developers to submit proposals to build 20 to 30 apartments and first-floor commercial space in the school.

Proposals are due Jan. 23. If a viable plan emerges and the school board approves, Morningside Elementary's sale would be a promising first sign that the partnership could find new uses for the other schools, said Kyra Straussman, the authority's real estate director.

"Pittsburgh has some of the most beautiful school buildings," Straussman said. "But some of these buildings are going to be a real challenge to developers."

Renovation costs could run \$150 to \$175 a square foot, she said.

The district shuttered most of the schools during a 2006 downsizing that closed 22 buildings and left 65 open to accommodate the district's 26,500 students, said Paul Gill, the district's outgoing director of operations.

The average age of the 18 buildings is 75 years, and the average size is about 75,000 square feet. Gill said 90 percent to 95 percent are in good condition inside, with the exception of Westside Traditional Academy, where a furnace failure turned the interior into a soggy ruin.

Schenley High School, also vacant, is not for sale because it is laden with asbestos and needs a new heating and ventilation system, Gill said.

Knoxville Elementary/Middle School was not in top shape when operators of One Small Step, a nonprofit, after-school activity center for students, took a tour late last year, said John Hairston, the group's program director.

"They had basically gutted the school," he said. "They had taken the kitchen apart and sent the parts to other schools. The plumbing was bad, the water was contaminated and nothing worked. The desks, tables and chairs were all gone."

Hairston said the district wanted to charge the group \$20,000 a month to cover utility and maintenance costs for using the school temporarily. Plans for One Small Step to try to buy it are on hold, but Hairston and some Knoxville residents hope the building will be reused.

"It would be nice if it would be opened for kids to get them off the streets," said Mary Ann Flaherty-Bennett of Knoxville. "Anything would be better than leaving a building idle."

Jacque Fielder, Democratic Party chairwoman for the 12th Ward, said she believes the district teaming with the URA will allow city residents to have a greater say in how the schools will be used. In September, Fielder complained to district officials that the sale of Lemington School to Destiny International Ministries for \$125,000 happened too fast and with too little community input.

"The process wasn't transparent, and it didn't give the community a reasonable amount of time to respond," she said, adding that she is happy with the new owner.

Gill agreed with Fielder's concerns and brought in the URA to help.

Gill said the URA has made the district a savvy seller -- it even recently turned down "a pittance" that was offered for Prospect Elementary/Middle School in Mt. Washington.

The most lucrative sale the district has made is East Hills Elementary School, which Imani Christian Academy bought in September for \$1 million.

Gill said the district will try to avoid selling more vacant schools to charter schools.

"We don't want to sell to competitors, if we can help it," he said. "Charter schools basically divert tax dollars away from public schools.

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