

Roosevelt Center News Updates

The fight to save Roosevelt High School

By Benjamin Kline

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DAYTON | Members of the Roosevelt High School Class of 1952 have collected \$1,393 toward renovating a third-floor classroom at the school as a historical museum. They'd better hurry. Dayton school officials say the 307,000-square-foot Roosevelt Center, as it's now called, will be up for sale in half a year. If no suitable buyer can be found for the building and its 5.93-acre site at 2013 W. Third St., it will be demolished.

Repairs to bring it up to modern standards might cost \$29 million to \$38 million, the district's survey says. Annual maintenance is around \$1 million.

But if Roosevelt falls, the cost in community feelings could be incalculably higher. As a high school from 1923 to 1975, Roosevelt graduated many of the city's outstanding leaders. Some are working to rescue the former home of the "Mighty Teddies."

Three city priority boards staged a "Rally to Save Roosevelt" Thursday evening in front of the great brick and concrete building, with its stately old shade trees, majestic neo-Tudor facades and priceless ceramic tile ornament. They claim school officials, while campaigning for the recent bond issue to fund a massive rebuilding project, promised to keep Roosevelt open to the community.

The Dayton Board of Education on Friday named a "blue ribbon task force" to study options for Roosevelt. Board President Gail Littlejohn asked it to submit recommendations by Nov. 25.

"We feel a sense of commitment to the southwest Dayton community and

understand their desire to keep Roosevelt as a community anchor," Littlejohn said.

"This school birthed a lot of great people," said Donald E. Hubbard, Class of 1957, retired associate director of human resources for the district. "We were known throughout Ohio. We got a top-notch education at Roosevelt. Our Theodore awards for academic achievement were like Oscars."

"A lot of history is going to go down if they tear down this building," said Donna Robinson Wright, Roosevelt Class of 1958. "If I was in a tornado, I'd feel safer here than in my home. It's a good solid structure. But I understand, as an employee, that it costs a lot of money to maintain."

Mrs. Wright, coordinator of the district's Office of Family Involvement, is one of 124 Board of Education employees who have offices at Roosevelt, along with Third District police officers, a recreation center and Central State University West offices and classes. The building is so big, however, that a visitor can glance down the main hallway, well over 100 yards, and see no one.

Visions of the past are abundant. Head custodian Doug Thomas, 44, recalled, "As a freshman, I

was lured by the reputation the school had, as a sort of gangsta city. Then I got here and found it was not that way at all. It was real friendly, close-knit. There was a lot of school pride."

Thomas, who eventually graduated from the new Roth High School, was one of several Roosevelt alumni who noted the ceramic tile "seal" on the floor of the main hall, near the east entrance.

"If you stepped on that seal, you got jumped on, but no blood was spilled," he said with a grin. Years later, aging alumni are careful to walk respectfully around the mosaic tile numerals MCMXIII and 1935 with a torch of learning.

"This was my science room," said Deloris Morris Smith, Class of 1963 and today the secretary in a cubicle for seven district psychologists. "I had all good teachers at Roosevelt. I'm really proud of my school, and I think many of us are grateful we could come to Roosevelt and find a role model for our lives."

Roosevelt was not yet 50 percent integrated in her day, Smith said, but, "It was OK. We got along."

Wright added, "We didn't think in color terms. We were just classmates. If you leave kids alone, they have things in common. They get along good.

"It hurts to see a school converted," Wright said, "When you walk past empty lockers and think, when there were 2,000 to 3,000 kids here, and now there are fewer than 125 people, including Central State."

The district might sell Roosevelt for \$1 to "any group that can show it has a viable re-use plan" and the money to carry it out, said Mike Sullivan, chief of business operations. "We'll work with anybody to get out from under the cost of maintaining it."

Maintenance has been allowed to lapse, shamefully in the view of some Roosevelt loyalists. Boilers are shut during warm weather, meaning no hot water for showers in the recreation center. Part of the security camera apparatus was taken out for repair and not returned.

Handicapped access and fire suppression systems are inadequate. Some big class pictures "walked away" and did not return; others are stacked amid a jumble of trophies, willy-nilly, like the goods of King Tut's tomb, in an upstairs janitor room.

"One of our swimming pools has been down for five years," said Fletcher Powers, 68, recreation center director. "The other pool went down two or three months ago. We had 30 adults using it several nights a week as a therapeutic pool. People with arthritis. They have nowhere else to go now."

Still, Powers said he sees 300 to 400 people a day, mostly urban youth, using the center for basketball, karate, indoor track, weight-lifting, boxing, modern dance.

The city leased the south wing of Roosevelt High School for 25 years, for the rec center. The lease expires in 2006.

"It would be a tragedy to close this place down," Powers said. "The city put money here for the rec center and the police station. A little bit of work, maybe \$60,000 on the swimming pools, would keep this building going another 30 to 40 years. We need it. We ain't giving up."

Dayton architect Jeffrey Wray, the lead architect for the Stivers High School restoration, calls Roosevelt "a wonderful building, a grand school, built with no expense spared, and it ought to be maintained."

Wray said new development in the Wright-Dunbar neighborhood, just east of Roosevelt, could herald new opportunities or uses for the school.

The special alumni room "was the dream of one of our teachers, Evangeline Lindsley, who died recently at age 105," said Nick Nicholas, 69, president of the Class of 1952. "The board did give its approval, but not much has been done. The talk of demolition is not new, but you'd think it would cost more to tear it down than to maintain it."

Nicholas was perhaps unfortunate in his choice of simile when he said Roosevelt was "built like the Titanic. Everything in it was state of the art for 1923."

The Titanic went down on its first voyage. Roosevelt has lasted 80 years. It is now 70 years since the Teddies won their first state championship in basketball, dancing around the ferocious mosaic tile bear on the gym floor, chanting "One more, Big Red, one more!"

One more, Teddies; one more.

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