

PUBLIC LIFE

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Longfellow School
Citizens react to possible
demolition of hilltop landmark



Longfellow School

Citizens react to possible demolition of hilltop landmark

By Benjamin Hoak

“Longfellow School the best of all / Sits on a hill so very tall ...”

For many Owensboro residents of a certain age, these opening lines of Longfellow School’s fight song stir memories of childhood when they were full of promise, running up the hill to a building that must have seemed enormous.

Back then, of course, it was just a school, the place where they spent time between summers of freedom. Today, however, it’s part of the community’s history – which is why some former students and preservationists are alarmed that it might be torn down.

Owensboro Public Schools owns the two-story building that sits just north of Owensboro High School on the west side of Frederica Street. By the summer of 2007, the school board plans to begin construction on a gymnasium that will fill the open space between Longfellow School and Owensboro High School. The question is whether the school board will decide to tear down Longfellow to build the new gym or keep it and remodel the interior for another use. Currently Longfellow is used for ROTC programs, alternative to suspension programs, some extracurricular activities and storage.

The question of whether to preserve Longfellow is part of a larger debate in communities such as Owensboro about how far to go to save historical landmarks, given financial limits and the needs of the future.

In Longfellow’s case, “no decisions have been made yet,” said

Larry Vick, superintendent of the Owensboro Public School district. The school system is currently developing a facilities plan that must still be approved by the state before any new construction can begin; the gym is already part of the plan, but other changes are prolonging the process. Vick and school board member Nancy Eskridge said the board won’t decide about Longfellow until the facilities plan is complete and the board has reviewed its architect’s recommendations.

The school system has hired Sherman Carter Barnhart from Lexington to design the new gymnasium. The firm has experience in historical renovations and Eskridge said the school board asked it for options and expenses involved in both demolition and renovation of Longfellow.

Built like a bunker

“It’s a beautiful old building,” Eskridge said. “I would love to keep it.” She isn’t sure, however, that there will be a use for it because of the way it’s constructed.

According to records at the Daviess County property valuation office, the building contains 36,974 square feet, has a foundation of concrete, is constructed of wood and brick, and is valued at \$1.3 million.

It has “a structure like a bunker,” said Gary Adams, secretary-trea-

surer of the Preservation Alliance of Owensboro-Daviess County. "It's a solid building. It's still in good shape."

Therein lies some of the difficulty – and expense – of renovating the building for new purposes. "The inside walls are reinforced concrete," Vick said. "There's very little potential for reconstruction." Eskridge said the school system can't use classrooms in the building without an elevator available for disabled students and staff, which it currently doesn't have.

She added that Longfellow can't be easily redesigned, but "you can do anything if you have enough money. It's all tied to cost. What's the cost to remodel against the cost to start over? We're stewards of the public's money. We have to see what the architects can tell us. If it does come down, what goes up in its place would look just as nice if not better and satisfy the needs of Owensboro Public School students for years to come."

Vick said the school system will probably continue using the building at least until the new gym is completed.

A long history

Preservationists and former students point out that Longfellow represents important history in the Owensboro community. Construction began on the school in August of 1931 and was completed in time for the spring semester beginning Jan. 25, 1932. According to a Jan. 17, 1932, article in the *Messenger-Inquirer*, Key Bros. Construction of Murray, Ky., was awarded the building contract in the sum of \$68,425. The company followed the design plans of William Butts Itner, a famous St. Louis architect who was considered a national expert in elementary school design.

"The building is one of the most attractive of its kind," the article read. It contained 11 classrooms on two floors, as well as an auditorium that seated 400 and was equipped with a booth for "moving picture purposes." Each classroom also had the capacity for moving picture machines. At the time, J.L. Foust (for whom Foust Elementary was named) was superintendent of the city schools. Members of the board involved with the new building included W.A. Steele, James H. Davis and W.R. Jagoe.

Adams thinks officials should do everything they can to save Longfellow. "Our contention is you should bend over backwards when you have a building of that character and significance to try to find a way to integrate it, even if it costs a little more," he said. "Unless there's a compelling reason to get rid of a building of that character, why do it?"

Fond memories

Longfellow was last used as an elementary school in 1975. Many of its former students still reside in Owensboro and look back fondly on their elementary school days. "We still get together," said Ann McManus, who attended the school from first through sixth grade, along with her sister, Marylou Steele, her sister-in-law, Marge Hager, and Beverly Steele. "We know the fight song. I remember where we played baseball out in the yard. The hill behind it is where we all went sleigh riding. It was loads of fun. Most everybody walked to school. I thought it was awfully far away, but it wasn't.

"We have discussed it. We think it would be absolutely a terrible thing to tear it down," she said.

Joe Haycraft of Owensboro, a retired airline pilot who attended the school in the 1930s, still remembers the names of two of his first teachers, Ms. Smitha and Ms. Lumpkin. "We need to keep beautiful old buildings like this," he said. "They're the fabric of our community."

Sue Haycraft, who is married to Joe, also went to Longfellow in first grade. "I believe in preservation for posterity and future generations," she said. "I've talked to all kinds of people who do not want it torn down. Even as a six-year old, it impressed me. I can remember the sun streaming in those windows."

"Adaptive reuse"

But a community often needs more than just memories to save old structures. "We have torn down a tremendous amount of beautiful old buildings," says architect Terry Blake of RBS Design Group in Owensboro.

Why? Not because no one remembered them, but because there was no use for them any longer. If a building is to be saved, it must have a purpose.

Blake is an advocate of what he calls adaptive reuse. It doesn't necessarily involve preserving structures exactly the way they were built; instead, old buildings such as Longfellow are adapted to

modern standards while still maintaining the aesthetics of their past. "I would just have to hope it could be considered (in Longfellow's case)," he said. "We can't have disposable architecture anymore," he said. "We can't afford to."

Blake believes it might be easier to adapt the use of Longfellow if the building itself could be moved to another spot on the same site. "It's amazing what technology will do. There are some giant movers out there. You can move two- and three-story buildings, all masonry," he said. "It's not necessarily cheap, he added. "But sometimes in the interest of heritage, it's worth doing."

Eskridge said the school board has not considered the possibility of moving the building because no one has mentioned the idea to them.

Independence Bank, which is headquartered in Owensboro, recently announced plans to undertake the kind of

adaptive reuse Blake describes. The bank is purchasing a historical building on St. Ann St. across from the courthouse and renovating it into a downtown branch of its operations. According to vice-president Larry Mayfield, officials initially wanted a new building that would have been a replica of historical American architecture, similar to the bank's other branches.

When they saw the St. Ann St. building, though, they realized that it would retain the look of historical Owensboro while fitting in with the look of their other buildings. The bank carefully weighed cost options before deciding to proceed, Mayfield said. "We've got to be good stewards of what we have," he said. "We felt it probably would be a little more expensive to keep the old building, but we felt like it would be worth it as a token of what can be downtown and as saving pieces of the past for the future."

Historic downtown

While many historic buildings in downtown Owensboro have already been lost, plenty still remain to be saved. Daviess Fiscal Court recently budgeted \$200,000 to renovate the Smith-Werner building at Second and St. Ann streets. Add in \$31,000 from a city

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– Gary Adams
Preservation Alliance

Longfellow School

Renaissance grant, and according to county commissioner Bruce Kunze, the county will have enough to restore the rare iron façade on the front of the building as well as rebuild the back wall and gut the building in preparation for retrofitting.

“It was a group decision that we felt the building was worth preserving,” Kunze said. “Historically, it’s one of the most significant buildings downtown. It’ll really be an interesting and attractive building. I think it gives the community . . . a lot of character, it makes it interesting, makes it attractive to tourists.”

Kunze predicts the downtown area is ready “to boom and explode with growth” and hopes restoration efforts will help attract new businesses. Kunze also has a personal interest in preserving local historical buildings. His father and grandfather were partners in a men’s clothing store downtown from 1937 to 1978. His grandfather began working at the Newberry-Wile building when he was 14 and worked in the same block for more than 70 years. “Because (the county) owns the buildings (i.e. Smith-Werner), because they are historically significant, I think Fiscal Court has some responsibility to maintain the buildings,” he said.

If county government can get its own buildings in good shape, perhaps it can induce private investors to move their businesses into such buildings, thus creating the public-private partnerships that seem so beneficial, Kunze said.

Mike Wallace, who owns MediaWorks, an advertising firm in Owensboro, understands the importance of private investors. He bought the building at 208 W. Third St. (two doors down from Colby’s Restaurant) a couple of years ago after keeping his eye on it for a long time. When the owner retired, he sold it to Wallace, who renovated it and moved his company to the facility. “It has really unique architectural features to it,” he said. “It dates back to 1895 . . . it didn’t have the attention a lot of the old buildings downtown need.

“I do believe these old buildings are really part of a treasure,” he continued. “Without a doubt, they speak to our history. There are great stories behind every building.” His own building once served as a bank, and the basement served as a barbershop many years ago (it is one of only two walk-down basements in downtown Owensboro).

From a bottom-line financial standpoint, it’s sometimes easier and more cost-effective to simply tear down old buildings and start from scratch, he said, but it doesn’t add much to the character and history of the community. Tax incentives and abatements help those interested in preserving historical structures, but private investors are needed. “We’ve got some buildings we’re close to losing if someone doesn’t step up,” he said.

Can they be saved?

While buying and renovating historic buildings may be within the grasp of some private investors, many citizens can’t follow that example. They can, however, have a voice in helping to preserve the landscape of their town, even with a building such as Longfellow.

“We always listen to citizens,” Eskridge said, when asked if a group of concerned residents could make a difference. “I’m sure it would factor in. I’m not sure it would make the decision. Our responsibility is to the students. We have to do the right thing for the kids; that will be the right thing for the citizens. All of it will be done with the public in mind. I wish there was some really easy solution. I’d like to save it if we could; we need to have a use for it.”

“Our board has made a real commitment to the past with Owensboro High School,” Vick added, saying that many communities haven’t saved their original city high schools. What the school board has to do now is decide “what will be necessary to keep Owensboro High School viable for the future,” he said.

“It’s through our built environment we’re able to have identity with our past,” Blake said. “The older I get, the greater value I put on our past.” ■

Preserving History



The Breedenbach Building in downtown Owensboro, restored by MediaWorks.



The Smith-Werner building at Second and St. Ann streets will soon be restored with the help of the Daviess County Fiscal Court and a city Renaissance grant.

Benjamin Hoak



Ben examined the pros and cons of an emerging historic preservation issue, including the sentimental attachment that many former students have with Longfellow School.

“Working on the Longfellow assignment reminded me how everything and everyone has a story to tell. Buildings, people, towns – they’re all worth discovering, no matter what we decide about them in the end. There’s always more than meets the eye.”

A Kentucky Wesleyan College graduate, Ben is a former middle school teacher and a fellow of the World Journalism Institute. He is a special publications writer for the *Messenger-Inquirer*.