

PICK YOUR PARTY: Highland candidates are chosen by "Peoples" and "Citizens" caucuses. C10

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Costly school deal a mystery

By CHRISTOPHER SMART
The Salt Lake Tribune

HEBER CITY — The contract for the \$4 million renovation of the historic North School was awarded by Wasatch School District six months before it was publicly approved by the school board.

Wasatch School District officials said they will not explain how that happened.

The district's business administrator won't talk about it. "I don't have time to

Wasatch officials mum on \$4 million project; attorney general alerted

talk about it," said Keith Johansen.

Some former board members won't talk about it. "I don't have time to review it," said Kevin DiStephano.

Ron Davis, also a former board member, did not return phone calls.

Even the new district superintendent won't talk about it. "I see no need for this story," said Terry Shoemaker.

Shoemaker was not superintendent at the time the contract was signed. His predecessor, Danny Talbot, could not be

reached for comment, despite repeated efforts.

Nonetheless, present and former school district officials could be answering questions from the Utah Attorney General's Office. The state will review how a \$400,000 plan for construction of a modest administration building grew into the \$4 million renovation of the 100-year-old building.

Details surrounding how and when the decision was reached remain a mystery. See **SCHOOL JOB**, C14

School job prompting questions

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mystery, said Tracy Taylor, the Wasatch PTA's legislative liaison, who attends nearly every school-board meeting.

"Somewhere they made a decision to go from \$400,000 to \$4 million. But we can't find it in the minutes," Taylor said. "We just want to see when they decided to forgo the new building and renovate the North School. That's a lot of money for a rural school district."

The outcome is curious because, among other things, the district's Land and Building Committee earlier had recommended that the board spend no district funds on renovation of the North School, according to the board's minutes of Feb. 25, 1999.

During the late 1990s the board had turned a deaf ear toward those who would seek federal and state preservation funding for a renovation, said resident Annie McMullen. The building seemed perfect for a public library, said McMullen, who last year was elected to the Wasatch County Council. "When I told them I believed [historic grant] funding was available, they told me to come back next year," she recalled.

What is clear is that in the spring of 2000 the district had determined to proceed with the renovation of the North School as a combination administrative building and special-education center.

Johansen, the district's business administrator, signed two contracts in May 2000 with Architectural Design West to provide architectural and construction management services for the old school's renovation. The work would be done in two phases: The first would cost an estimated \$2.6 million to \$3.2 million; the second phase would cost an estimated \$750,000 to

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TRACY TAYLOR
Wasatch PTA legislative liaison

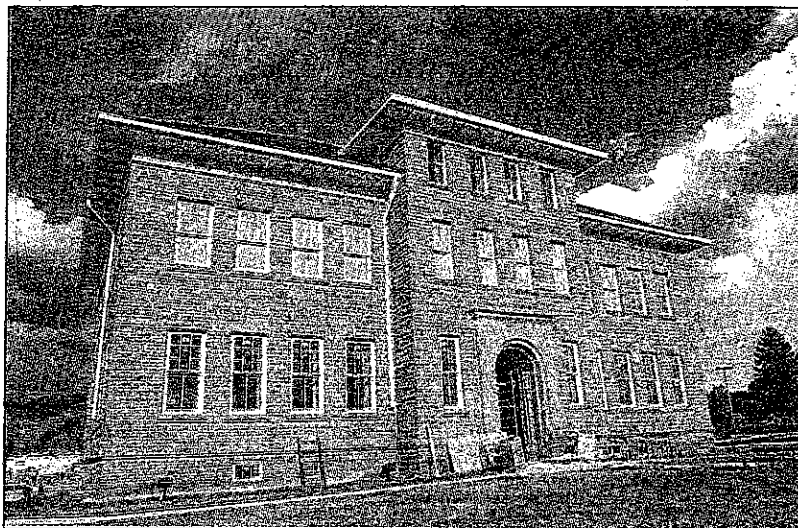
\$1.1 million.

Architectural Design West was mentioned in minutes of the school board's July 13 meeting. "A motion was made by Ron Davis to authorize the superintendent to continue working with Design West in the remodeling of the North School property. Motion carried unanimously."

But it was not until Dec. 7, 2000, according to the board's minutes, that the board determined it would accept the contract, apparently signed six months earlier.

"After some discussion, a motion was made to award the bid to provide design and construction management services for the remodel of the North School to Architectural Design West. Motion carried unanimously."

Architectural Design West



DANNY CLAIN LA/The Salt Lake Tribune

The renovation for the old North School in Heber City has raised eyebrows as its cost has skyrocketed, and it may be the target of an investigation by the Utah Attorney General's Office. Officials from the Wasatch School District and the district's board have declined to comment on the project.

later sued the school district when the renovation exceeded estimates and the school district withheld funds. The job is being completed by Layton Construction.

The Attorney General's Office will take two to three weeks to determine if there were any

laws broken when the contract was made.

"We're reviewing the whole procedure, step by step, to see how the project evolved," said Phil Pugsley, assistant attorney general.

"We'll determine whether it was just sloppily done or if there

is something culpable in any way."

But for Taylor and a group of 27 citizens who wrote to the attorney general seeking answers, the verdict is already in.

"This stinks to high heaven," Taylor said.

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