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THE WASATCH

North School Renovation Questioned

Part Two of a Two Part Series

BY TISH DAHMEN
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Editor's Note: Last week, The Wave's article on the North School looked at the cost of renovation, the lawsuit between Architect Design West and the Wasatch County School Board and community support.

For people living in Wasatch County, the North School is like a touchstone. If there are those who didn't attend school in the red quarry rock building, chance are, they are related to or are friends with someone who did. For some local families, three or more generations were educated within the walls of the 100 year-old school.

When the aging building was condemned, paying for the renovation became a community-wide issue.

A spokesperson for a citizen's group calling for an investigation in the actions

of the former Wasatch County School Board of Education concerning the cost of the North's School renovation said the group wants "an accounting of the board's actions."

Tracy Taylor, Parent Teacher Association legislative liaison for the District said her group believes the former school board didn't investigate other funding possibilities.

Grants

Taylor said community members offered the school board proposals for use of the North School and the means to

finance its preservation.

One such person was Annie McMullen, now a Wasatch County Councilwoman.

More than four years ago, McMullen offered to spearhead an effort to secure grants from historical building preservation organizations but was turned down by the school board.

McMullen said she'd been in contact with the National Trust for the Preservation of Historic Buildings, located in Denver, Colo., and they'd

SEE "NORTH SCHOOL" ON PAGE A4

North School Reno

Cost of North School Too High?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

expressed a willingness to grant renovation monies to the school.

"They already had two thick files on the North School," she said.

At the time, McMullen was also in touch with other historical societies interested in preserving the North School.

The board chose not to recognize McMullen's proposal.

Keith Johansen, business administrator for the District, said the former school board did look at historical grants but found they weren't sufficient to cover the cost of renovation or were too "restrictive."

Former Wasatch County School Superintendent Danny Talbot also said the school board considered grants to help fund construction.

"The architect (Design West) told us they would be looking for grants and that they were going to do that throughout the construction process," he said.

Talbot said the school board had no reason to doubt Design West as they'd toured several historic buildings the company had been involved in the renovation of as the architects, such as Old Main, the administration building at Utah State University.

"They had a strong history of design renovation. They did the Logan School District Offices and they'd done a real nice job. They showed they were effective and timely and came in under budget."

Taylor said that for whatever reason relations between Design West and the school board broke down, both failed to register the North School as a renovation with the state, as was required by law in 2000.

Financing

In a *Wave* article, dated April 29, 1998, Talbot assures Wasatch County taxpayers that the \$12 million bond raised to pay for a new middle school would not be used to build a new District office. Instead, Talbot said the District had saved \$300,000 to \$400,000 to finance the construction for a new District office.

Taylor said a search of school board minutes doesn't reveal when plans changed for this new District office, or when they were discussed.

"I don't remember hearing anything about this new District office until the article in the *Wave* came out. The most

important capital outlay project for the district was never discussed in a school board meeting," she said.

"Our big concern is that there doesn't appear to be full disclosure... not in the minutes or in any of the public discussions about the North School. And the only contract with Design West has the signature of the District's business administrator. As far as I know, common practice requires the signature of the school board for these types of contracts," she said.

To pay for North School renovations, the school board opted to use the \$2.9 million unused portion of the \$12 million bond raised to build the Rocky Mountain Middle School. And, contrary to Talbot's promise, since the North School will house the District offices, the middle school bond money went to pay for it.

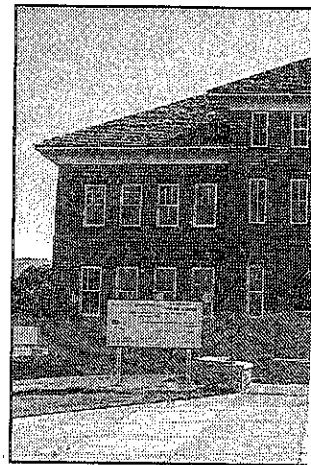
Last year, when the Wasatch County School District Board of Education approved a 13.4 percent tax levy raise at its Truth in Taxation hearing, many residents connected the District's budget shortfalls to the North School project. Many taxpayers at the meeting were concerned because in the material handed out to the audience, neither the North School, nor its budget was listed.

Also, the meeting opened with Ron Davis, the former school board president, saying, "The North School has nothing to do with tonight's meeting. We will not be discussing the North School."

Superintendent Terry Shoemaker said there was "good reason" why North School finances were not included in the budget material dispensed.

He said Truth in Taxations are held specifically for budget items that are to be changed and last year's meeting was no exception. The North School budget was unaffected by the tax raise.

"We were not raising taxes for that



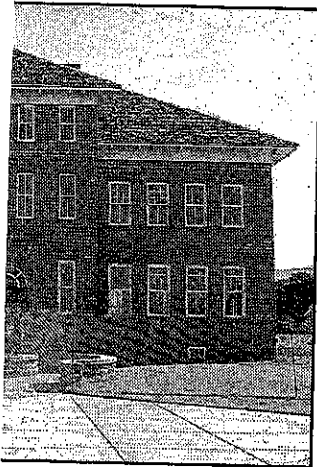
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(North School) purpose so that information was not on those lists," he said.

Shoemaker itemized school funds secured to pay for the renovation. He said \$2.9 was gleaned from the middle school bond. He said the use of that money was restricted to purchasing land, constructing schools, renovation projects, or repairs. It couldn't be used for operation costs, salaries or equipment purchases.

Another \$825,000 was allocated to the project from the sale of the Central School to Heber City last March. The entire purchase price went to the project, Shoemaker said.

The balance of renovation costs, now estimated to be at \$4 million, and perhaps more, is being funded through an open



line of credit negotiated through Zions National Bank in Heber City. This approximately \$275,000 is being loaned to the District at an interest rate "as low as you can get," Shoemaker said.

He said the District has money to put toward the debt, and the loan is payable over several years.

Nevertheless, critics remain unconvinced.

Taylor said the District was "hard put" to come up with money to fund \$276,000 to repair the high school roof, upgrade the junior high school's air conditioning and furnace, and remodel Midway Elementary School this year.

"They had to raise taxes to meet those needs," she said. "These projects could have been funded from the \$2.9 million leftover bond money."

No Representation

Most disconcerting to Taylor and her citizens' group, is the what she perceives as the former school board's habit of meeting "in executive session and adjourns immediately following, usually without a public vote," as they wrote in their letter to the Utah State Attorney General.

"This North School could have been a

great opportunity for our local community to come together. Saving this building could have really united everyone. But the (former) school board shut everybody out. They acted like it was their building and not the communities," she said. "No one on the former board wanted to answer questions about the North School. They wouldn't field questions. And wouldn't bring it up. Even at this year's Truth and Taxation meeting they wouldn't bring it up. There isn't even a formal budget for it."

Shoemaker said since he has been in office, whenever the North School project has come up, he's seen the school board respond to questions.

"They've been given. In every case we've responded. When Tracy [Taylor] asked the cost of the North School, we gave her an answer," he said.

Legacy

One hundred years ago, Heber City's North School opened its doors to Wasatch County children.

Five years ago, the building was emptied. Kindergartners and preschoolers, the last classes to roam its halls, were re-assigned to other schools.

Its doors closed, the building condemned, the old school was in imminent danger of being torn down.

Talbot said, "The building was condemned. There was a huge liability cost to the District. It cost a lot of money to keep it heated so pipes wouldn't explode in the winter. And it was anybody's guess when something dangerous could happen - kids playing in an empty building.

"In the long run, the board felt it was a valuable piece of heritage for the valley, like the Bank Block. They took a long time deciding what to do with it... preserve heritage or tear it down? Some people feel it is wasteful. The board decided to go the heritage route."

In December, the District expects construction to be complete. At that time, a community open house will be held, and the historic school's doors will open once again.

Superintendent Shoemaker said, "This is a wonderful facility. Rather than focus on what happened way back when, let's look forward. The North School is an incredible tribute to both this valley's past, its present and its future."

Taylor said, "I have full confidence in the present school board and superintendent. But yet decisions were made four years ago that are effecting all us now. We need an accounting."