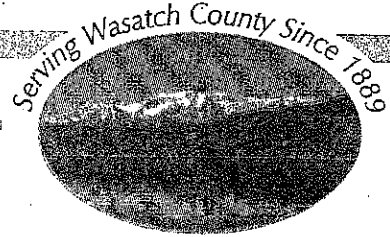


# THE WASATCH

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## Cost of North School Too High? Community Treasure or Financial Fiasco

### Part One of a Two Part Series

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Wave Editor

Transforming the historic North School from a condemned building to a "community education center" has been arduous, complicated by budget shortfalls, lawsuits and reoccurring community opposition.

Renovations to the North School are now more than a \$1 million higher than what Wasatch County School District budgeted for four years ago when it began the project.

When the District's school board,

then made up of Ron Davis, Kevin DiStefano, Betty Smedley, Claudia Bradshaw and Richard Bonner, first decided to go forward with the project, their contractor, Architects Design West, estimated the renovation at \$2.8 million. With construction nearing completion, the price tag has jumped to nearly \$4 million. And, that is without computing potential legal costs.

A citizens' group is demanding a public accounting of the project. "We just want to our District to run as efficiently as possible," Tracy Taylor, a member of the group said.

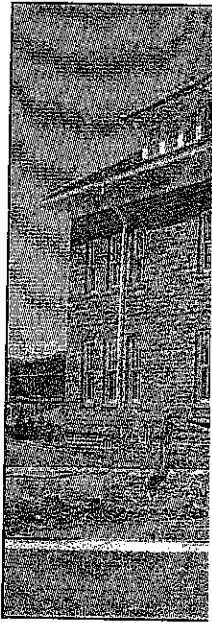
The group took their concerns to the state's Attorney General's Office (AG) last December accompanied by

a petition with more than 30 signatures on it.

Since that time, the AG's office has been looking into the matter. Formal letters of inquiry were sent to former school board members and Danny Talbot, former superintendent in August. Phil Pugsley, assistant attorney general, told *The Wave* in a interview last month that although the AG is reviewing the North School project, their review isn't a formal investigation.

Superintendent Terry Shoemaker confirmed Pugsley's statement, saying the AG office has requested information for several months and the School District has complied

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The North School, closed, is scheduled for Dec

# North School Renovation

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with all requests. "They have made requests for material, we've responded to their requests. We've completed the most recent one," Shoemaker said.

Shoemaker said his comments about the project are necessarily restrictive because of a lawsuit between Wasatch County School District and the project's original contractor, Architectural Design West.

## Lawsuit

Design West is suing the Wasatch County School District for an amount in excess of \$600,000 for breach of contract. They filed their suit in July 2002.

The District filed a counter suit in March of this year claiming Design West violated their contract because of excessive construction costs and defective work. They are seeking damages in excess of \$1 million.

Design West entered into a design/build contract with the District in November 2000. The board formally accepted the bid at their Dec. 7, 2000 meeting.

However, in September of 2001, Design West had their contractor's license pulled by the state of Utah "due to a change in personnel," according to court documents.

Court documents indicate that the District may have agreed to temporarily take over the role of contractor until Design West was able to regain its license. It seems the District paid out \$58,000 to subcontractors during this time.

Nonetheless, other subcontractors, named as Utah Home Building Company, is suing both the District and Design West as a third party for \$55,000. They joined the suit last May.

Most recently, Design West requested a change of venue from 4th District Court, citing a

fair and impartial jury couldn't be produced in Wasatch County if the case goes to trial.

The request was granted and on July 23, the venue was changed to 3rd District Court in Summit County.

## Abandoned Project

Soon after Design West lost its license, construction on the building came to a halt.

The building was left gutted, with a hole in the roof and many of its windows open to winter weather.

In November 2002, a new school board was elected. Anni Marie Horner and Helen Robinson, were elected and Alan Bluth was appointed earlier that September to replace Betty Smedley. The new board, with continuing members Claudia Bradshaw and Robert Salazar, who replaced Richard Bonner in the November 2000 election, made the decision to continue the project as economically as possible. They hired Layton Construction to complete the renovation.

Layton picked up the pieces of the project in August 2002. Under the direction of construction site supervisor, Don Graybill, the renovation was completed in four phases.

## Community Support

Although community support for preserving the North School is widespread, most people contacted by the *Wave* expressed concern over the cost. There is one group of citizens who are questioning the former school board's actions.

The citizens' group is led by Deb Anderson and Taylor, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) legislative liaison for the District for the past six years. They say one of their issues with the project is that the school board sitting from 1998 to 2000 were unresponsive to community concerns or input. "But they represented them-

selves as doing what the community wanted," Taylor said.

Taylor added, "We are not, and never were, in favor of razing the school to ground. All we want is an accountability of the school board's actions. We contend that the financial straits the District found itself in last year causing it to raise our taxes two years in a row, would never have happened if the school board would have followed their own steering committee's advice."

The steering committee, called the Land and Building Committee, was organized by the school board in September 1998. They made a full report on the Central and North Schools to the board in February 1999. As per the board's Feb. 25, 1999 minutes, Ralph Lugton, committee chairman, reported, "The District should not use District school money to refurbish either North or Central Schools," and, "Civic organizations should take the lead of buying and refurbishing North and Central Schools in such a way that the properties can have on-going benefits to the community."

In fact, then Superintendent Danny Talbot was quoted in a Jan. 6, 1999 *Wave* article saying the committee "wants to recommend to find a user who will save the building and keep the spaces open if possible."

Shoemaker said from his discussions with former school board members, he believes the board felt they were following the wishes of the community by renovating the school.

Keith Johansen, business administrator for the District, said the steering committee didn't want new monies raised for the project but approved using the balance of the middle school bond.

*Next week: grants, financing and the North School legacy.*