

Uncertain future for vacant school properties

by Ben Myers, Staff Writer

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The Gothic centerpiece of seven buildings once known as Andrew J. Bell Middle School looms over Treme, where the campus takes up two square blocks. An alarm system protects the buildings, but perimeter fencing is torn away in several places, allowing access to a cavernous site. Vandalism is everywhere.

Bell is almost certainly finished as a traditional public school, a status it shares with 15 other defunct sites for which the state-run Recovery School District has no use. In the case of Bell, the site is a dominant, historic landmark.

"In the past, some (New Orleans schools) have been beautiful buildings, anchors to the community. Neighborhoods have grown up around them," said Marilee Utter, a Denver-based development expert who oversaw a 2009 Urban Land Institute report on former school sites in the city. "When they are sitting vacant and dilapidated and deteriorating, it has the same impact on the entire neighborhood."

The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in January approved returning control of the 16 sites to the Orleans Parish School

Board, whose jurisdiction over most city schools was stripped after Hurricane Katrina. The local school board will be responsible for selling the sites once the transfer occurs.

That isn't happening any time soon.

OPSB wants appraisals and market studies on all 16 sites before taking control, said OPSB Chief Financial Officer Stan Smith. It could be another six months before they hit the market, he said. That leaves RSD on the hook indefinitely for the sites' upkeep.

"They have to be insured, they have to have their grass cut. If they are vandalized they have to be repaired," said Tara O'Neill, policy manager at the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University. "Flat out, no one has the money to do that long term."

RSD Deputy Superintendent for Operations Ramsey Green agrees. Green said RSD spends \$429,000 every year on grass cutting at unoccupied school sites, although he could not provide comprehensive maintenance and insurance costs for the 16 sites.

Many of the unoccupied sites are still awaiting final determination on future use. The RSD is now proceeding with an updated master plan that could turn even more unusable school sites to the local school board.

"We need those buildings to be used for something else," Green said. "We would prefer to put that



Andrew J. Bell Middle School in Treme has had several proposals to put the building back online, including one for Artspace, a mixed-use arts campus. (Photo by Frank Aymami)



\$429,000 in the

classroom."

State law poses a complication in selling off school real estate. School boards are barred from accepting offers below 85 percent of appraised value when first attempting to sell a particular property. The threshold drops to 80 percent on the second attempt and the highest bidder succeeds outright on the third attempt.

Utter said heavy reliance on appraisals is designed to protect the public interest but actually does the opposite. School buildings are poorly suited for appraisals because nearby comparable properties are typically scarce, Utter said. The time it takes to match appraised value with buyer demand allows for greater depreciation, making it even more difficult to turn vacant schools over to the private sector, she said.

"What government everywhere often does is miss the market. They travel on their own timeline because of their own political considerations," Utter said. "(Interested buyers) can't be expected to hang around while you travel on government time."

Smith said he's heard at least three proposals for Bell in the last four years, including one from Minneapolis-based Artspace, a nonprofit that develops arts communities across the country. Artspace envisions a sprawling mixed-use campus for nonprofits, artists and young people. The proposal calls for as many as 70 affordable rental units for low-income artists and 25,000 square feet for rehearsal space, after-school programs and other community uses.

The refashioned Bell would house New Orleans Access TV and a distance learning program for the Cowles Center for Dance and Music, which is also in Minneapolis. The Urban League of Greater New Orleans would provide programming for students and parents.

It's a \$35 million to \$40 million project that could require six to seven funding sources, the largest being state and federal tax credits, said Joe Butler, Artspace's local project manager. Artspace has completed 27 similar projects, a portfolio that includes five former public schools in Chicago, New York and Minnesota.

Butler said Artspace never starts projects without necessary funding firmly in place, but securing money requires guaranteed site control. That would occur through a competitive bid process, and predicting a winner now is impossible. City officials are among those Smith said he has spoken with about Bell, although he did not describe what those conversations have entailed.

Artspace is accustomed to navigating bureaucratic hurdles, Butler said, but there is one thing that could jeopardize the group's patience: further dilapidation.

"The less physical deterioration, the less expensive the cost of doing the project," Butler said.

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