

Districts seek new uses for closed schools

By Teri Banas
staff writer

One suburban school official, who has spent the last few years dealing with school closings, sighed when he recalled how he first got started in public education.

"Back when I was studying school administration," he said, "they never taught us how to close a school. They just told us how to build them."

But, oh how times have changed. Since the mid-1970s, enrollment declines have led to school closings in growing numbers.

Buildings once designed for the teaching of children have become new problems for school districts and neighborhoods. And those involved are left to deal with the question of finding alternate uses.

Although school closings are often difficult, many districts have found the glut of vacant school buildings a bonus for their own expansion plans.

Some school districts have put the schools to use in other capacities.

"A school district has got to think of the future and its needs," said Farmington School superintendent Lewis Schulman.

"In our case, it (closing schools) gave us room to move. An example is we didn't have an early childhood education program before because we didn't have anywhere to have the program."

In Garden City, the former Cambridge Elementary School was transformed into an adult community center for a seven-member consortium of surrounding school districts.

GARDEN CITY is a case study of a district hard hit by declining enrollment.

From a peak enrollment of 14,000 students in 1969 to 15 buildings, it now has 6,500 students in seven buildings.

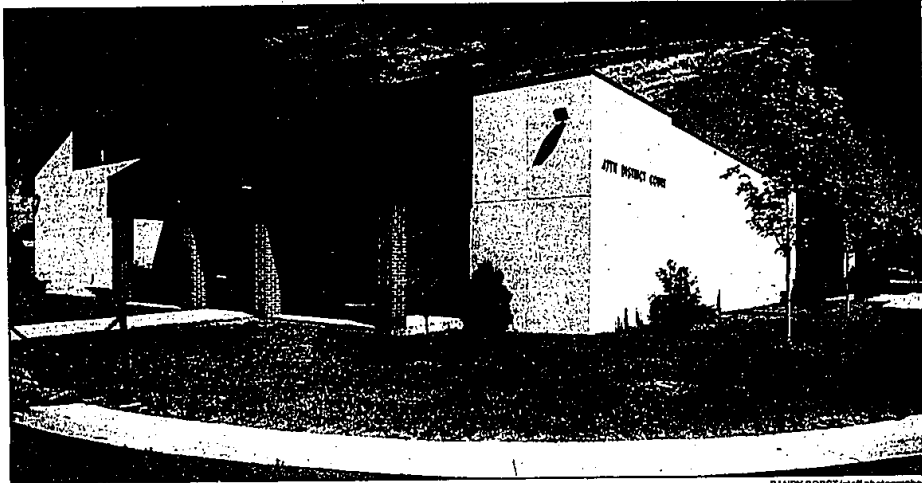
In the Livonia Public Schools, the Harrison Elementary School was turned into a warehouse for the district. Stored there are the furnishings and equipment that once filled operating school buildings.

According to Livonia school superintendent George Garver, the district now keeps an inventory of the surplus of such items as used desks and sewing machines for use when replacements are needed in operating schools.

"With the closing of schools, school equipment has become a real bugaboo," said George Garver. "We were able to sell one full-stocked library (from a closed elementary school) to another school in Kentucky by running ads. But we really had to work at it to get it sold."

SPECIAL EDUCATION centers have also cropped up frequently in former public schools. In Redford Township, for example, three public schools have been replaced by schools for the mentally retarded as well as an adolescent day treatment center.

Overall, the most common alternate uses of school buildings has been made by non-profit public agencies and governmental and quasi-governmental bodies. But due to zoning limitations surrounding school buildings, predomi-



RANDY BORDT/staff photographer

Farmington and Farmington Hills converted part of one a vacant school building into a new 47th District Court. The court is one

example of the variety of ways closed schools may be used.

nately found in residential areas, alternative uses often are not easily found.

"It's unbelievable how that will limit you because you don't have the option to find commercial utilization of the property (when found in residential neighborhoods)," said Garver.

School administrators have tried to lift the zoning restrictions by pushing legislation that would exempt school districts from local zoning laws. But a recent effort in the form of House Bill No. 4082 has proved unsuccessful so far. Fighting the bill is the Michigan Municipal League and the Michigan Township Association. A hearing on the proposed legislation was held earlier in the year before the house committee on towns and counties.

According to a committee aide, Bruce Bicknell, the hearing resulted in the committee chairman telling the three sides to resolve their differences, which has not been done so far. "It's a mute issue right now. The sides aren't even talking," he said.

Many school officials say the market has become glutted with school buildings and tenants are becoming more difficult to find.

The Livonia district, where more than 21 schools have been shut down and the closure of a high school planned for 1985, carries the dubious distinction of having closed more

schools than any other district in Michigan.

"At one point we sent out letters to hundreds of agencies, mostly non-profit," said Garver. "But most of our successful leases just walked in off the street. When the Michigan State Police moved an office into Madison Elementary School everyone was pleased with the result."

IN THE WAYNE-WESTLAND School District, where three more elementary schools are shutting this week, (five other elementary schools already have been closed) the district has made previous attempts in unloading property by doing such things as "offering real estate agents a 5-percent commission if they came up with a buyer," said that district's executive director for purchasing, Manuel L. Lentise Jr.

"If there's no interest soon," he said, "we'll have to start some active promotions."

Overall, however, most districts have difficulty in finding good uses for vacant property. And, if left vacant for long, the boarded property becomes the target of vandals and a neighborhood eyesore.

The other side of the coin is the financial drain of maintaining closed, unused school buildings.

"The initial reason for closing is be-



focus on education

cause it's too expensive to want to spend education money for the sake of maintaining a building," said Schulman.

"It's a major problem when you have a facility that's too good to be torn down but now it's time to re-roof a building you don't need. Jackson Elementary School, for example. It's a nice school. Should you let it deteriorate or should you protect your investment," said Garver.

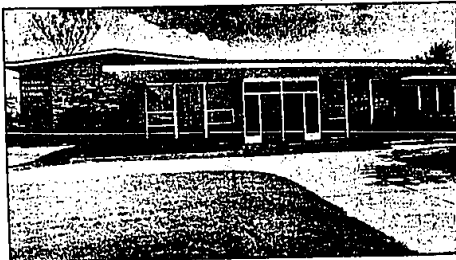
Typically, however, the sale or lease of school property rarely comes close to its actual value.

"Almost no district has found a market for surplus schools that comes anywhere near the true price of the facility," said Garver. "A new elementary school today would cost between \$4 and

\$5 million. Most of them (the used buildings) will come in under \$1 million unless it's on a (commercial) corner. "Originally, it (school closures) affected Wayne County most severely. But now it's nearly a statewide problem."

PLYMOUTH-CANTON Community Schools, a growing school district throughout the '70s, will close its first school because of declining enrollment in June 1984. School officials say they will turn it into a media center or adult education center or put it up for sale.

In addition to closing a building, the Extended School Year (ESY), which had some students attending classes year-round to accommodate the increase in student population, is being dropped this year.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

The former Jackson Elementary School in Livonia had been put to use as a community center by the city of Livonia. However, city cost-cutting measures resulted in the building being returned recently to the school district. It may be renovated into senior citizens housing.



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Playground supervisor Helen Bennett is surrounded by some of the youngsters who attend Starkweather Elementary School in Plymouth-Canton. The school is

scheduled to close next year but Bennett said, "I've been here 20 years, and I'll be here another 20 years. I won't let them close it."

OAKLAND DIAMOND EVENT

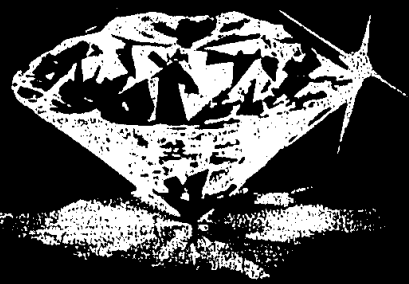
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