

SCHOOL from A9

tirely attractive option for a district trying to manage a gradually draining bond fund.

Lastly, option three was to sell the property off with conditions.

After much deliberation, in May 2019, the school board voted unanimously for the third option — to sell the property under the assumption it would be rezoned from R1 to R2 and that abatement of the asbestos could be stipulated upon sale.

The land was successfully rezoned in July that year in hopes it would allow the property to be used to develop a wider variety of housing types including duplexes and multifamily dwellings to help address Cottage Grove's housing needs.

This decision was met with some resistance from local residents at the time who felt they had been cheated out of a bond premise for a community recreation area.

"On their list of priorities, I don't know that they checked in with the community," said neighborhood resident Molly Patterson to *The Sentinel* at the time.

The district then posted a request for proposal (RFP) in September 2019 which stated that the property would be sold "at a fixed price of \$400,000 under the condition that the developer completes the abatement, and/or removal of asbestos and lead paint in the building or demolition and removal of the building."

Though real estate appraiser Duncan & Brown had put the property value at around \$745,000, the SLSD board voted to sell the property for the substantial discount due to the cost of dealing with the

toxic materials.

"The \$400,000 net value of the property is based upon an appraisal of the property less the cost of abatement and/or removal of asbestos and mitigation of the lead paint in the building," stated the RFP.

The board subsequently selected three proposals for consideration by committee.

A proposal by Homes for Good, Lane County's low-income housing agency, was passed over. The agency had proposed a target demographic of individuals and families making 50-80 percent of median household income, though the proposal did not allow for the degree of home ownership sought by the school district.

Instead, board members unanimously voted on Jan. 6, 2020, to begin negotiations with Blackstone Inc., a business owned by local developer Len Blackstone, who submitted the other two proposals.

Both proposals outlined plans to create Harrison Village, a unique "pocket neighborhood" development.

The concept consisted of a planned community of small clusters of dwelling units surrounding a courtyard, garden or other shared open space.

"The beauty of concept is that it focuses on building community, as opposed to only providing housing," Blackstone said.

The Blackstone proposals estimated between 90-100 units could be built on the 6.84-acre property, consisting of a mixture of housing such as duplexes and single-family homes. It also allowed for home ownership as opposed to management, which the school district preferred.

"More housing is one of the goals," said Assistant Superintendent Brian

McCasline following the decision to go with Blackstone. "Another goal of the school district is to be able to house our staff here. In the school district's interest, we have lost some staff in the past — and in the very near past — to positions in Eugene and Springfield where there's housing available."

The homes targeted potential homeowners who fell between 80-120 percent of median household income with an estimated price range between \$195,000 to \$295,000 per home and monthly rents in an expected range of \$900 to \$1,500.

Blackstone's two proposals differed in that one involved removing the old Harrison building while the other did not.

The Blackstone proposal with the school building removed states, "The proposer offers South Lane School District's full asking price of \$400,000 and accepts all the terms and conditions of this RFP and any addenda."

However, as months passed following the sale, no construction work had been done and the old Harrison building remained unchanged, prompting questions as to the fate of the building and property.

"Plans sometimes get interrupted," explained Blackstone. "In my case, it was COVID."

As COVID-19 dominated the landscape of 2020 and impacted his ability to secure a commercial real estate loan, Blackstone's aspirations for Harrison Village began to evaporate.

The land has since been partitioned into two lots, divided in half just 75 feet south of the southern edge of the school building. The 645-foot-long southern lot was later sold to Eugene-based Hi-Valley Development Corporation.

The company has recently started development on Harrison Village Apartments, a complex of 80 apartment units clustered in a community of 10 apartment buildings, all two-story. The plan calls for a mix of one- and two-bedroom units.

Earlier this year, however, when a posting of the land for sale indicated it was on the market for much more than it was bought, Blackstone became the target of speculation that a bait and switch had taken place.

A main point of confusion rested in whether or not the building's asbestos abatement and/or removal were stipulations in the sales contract. According to those close to the subject, the indication was that they were not.

Blackstone himself has stated as much.

In response to the public speculation, he released a public letter in March this year which stated that, "There was no requirement or preference communicated to interested purchasers that the old school building be renovated or removed. ... In the private selection process, committee members may have expressed a preference; but the only information I received at the end was (1) I had been selected, and (2) I could choose to remove or renovate the building."

Furthermore, the district did not specifically select either of the two proposals, Blackstone explained to *The Sentinel*, but rather simply chose him as the developer.

During the process, Blackstone recalled asking about any work that was required to be done on the building.

"I asked multiple times, 'Was there any requirement about what you want done with it, any perfor-

mance, any issues?' And the answer was 'no,'" he said. "And so, as far as I knew, there was no expectation."

This was in part why two proposals were submitted, he explained.

"If it was clear to me that they wanted only the abatement option, why would I double my costs?" he asked.

In any case, Blackstone added, his intention was to abate the school and build his development, a plan which turned out to be ill-fated, upset by the pandemic.

After selling the property, which is currently in escrow, he said he will turn his attention to other projects currently in planning stages, which he hopes will benefit the community.

Should ACE end up buying the old Harrison school and field, this will close Blackstone's chapter with the property.

"It'll be great for the community," said Blackstone of ACE's potential ownership. "And for parents who want their kids to go there, they'll have a much better place to go."

Building Safety

Still, ACE will face its own challenges to claiming a new home. One will be the public perception of the old Harrison building itself.

To address concerns and as part of obtaining the conditional use permit, ACE hosted a neighborhood meeting last week speaking to families, though Sahnaw noted she hoped for a higher turnout of area residents considering the school's intention to be a community partner.

"There was no one from the neighborhood who came with questions," Sahnaw said, despite sending out about 80 notices.

The question of the school's safety has been a focus over the nine months ACE has been looking into purchasing the building, she said, and the site has received multiple walk-throughs from officials and contractors in that time.

In addition to fire safety and other improvements, ACE has taken into consideration the presence of asbestos and lead paint in the old building.

Sahnaw pointed out that the bloated occupancy of the previous student population was what in part created the need for renovations and upgrades which would have disturbed any hazardous materials.

ACE has enlisted architect Trace Ward, one of the principals from Eugene-based company GLAS Architects, to help with the school's transition into the building. Ward was present at last week's neighborhood meeting to answer questions.

Ward's current assessment is that the building can safely house the school's 150-student population after renovations are complete.

"Our intent with the architect is obviously to make the building safe for kids," said Sahnaw. "We have no desire to put kids in a building that's not safe."

Among the concerns raised in the district's list back in 2016 was the presence of asbestos in the roofing, near steam piping, on temperature pneumatic controls, in window glazing and in floor tiles.

Bans on asbestos began in the 1970s and by 1989 the Environmental Protection Agency had largely banned asbestos in new materials and called for all school buildings to be inspected and repaired if

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