

Community interest puts purchasing former school back on the table

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

After more than four years, the former Cannon Beach Elementary School still sits vacant at the entrance of the town.

Some of the water fountains have started to grow moss. Old school chairs and debris from strong winter storms are scattered on the gym floor. The school, known for its dome-like gym, was closed due to tsunami safety concerns and lack of funding in 2013.

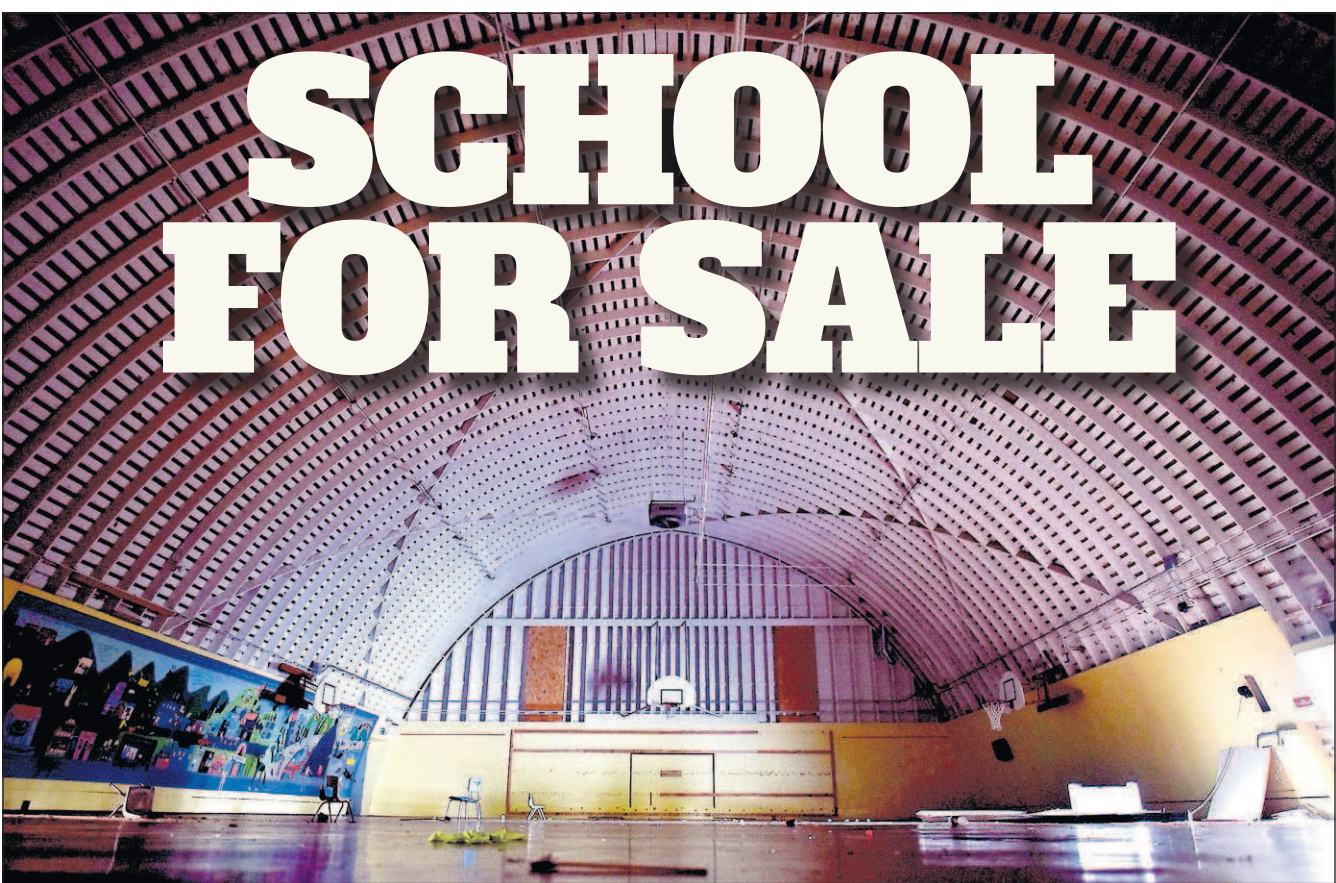
In the last few months, the city has received a growing number of letters with a similar request: Is the city going to buy the school?

Cannon Beach has considered purchasing the building from Seaside School District. Progress has been slowed by concerns about how it would be funded and how it fits with other looming capital projects like the South Wind evacuation site and an aging City Hall.

The city and the school district were unable to come to an agreement during preliminary negotiations last year, and the project shifted to the back burner.

But interest from individuals and around Cannon Beach, as well as a survey showing 77 percent of citizens believe developing the school into a community center is a priority, has put acquiring the facility back on the table.

“Some may say, ‘Why would you want to buy an old gym building?’” said Mayor Sam Steidel, a longtime pro-



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ponent of buying the property. “It used to be a very central part of the community. And it’s the entrance to our town. People care about that, and I think there’s been lots of efforts by citizens to say so.”

Worries about cost

It would cost \$450,000 to purchase the property, according to 2016 estimates. The cost of interior and exterior renovations would be about \$371,000, according to Coaster Construction. While most of the classrooms in the 1950s-era building would be unusable, an engineering report concluded the gym was in good condition.

Due to age and the years of sitting dormant, Steidel said there are worries about unexpected costs and the upkeep it would take to run it.

“What’s scaring people is the maintenance and the remodeling. You don’t know what you are going to find,” Steidel said.

With a \$99.7 million bond



Top: The expansive gym at the Cannon Beach Elementary School sits unused. Below: Chairs and other signs that the building once served as a school.

project in full swing to relocate four school buildings out of the tsunami zone, Seaside School District Superintendent Sheila Roley said the district has no interest in acting as a landlord for old school sites.

“We’re happy to talk to the city (of Cannon Beach) about any interest in the school,” Roley said. “We haven’t had any recent conversations, but we would love to have that building as a Cannon Beach community facility.”

ican village that once stood there.

“A part of the vision for NeCus has always been to acquire the remainder of the site in order to create a gateway to Cannon Beach that celebrates the natural beauty and cultural history of this extraordinary place,” said Katie Voelke, chairwoman of the Greater Ecola Natural Area. “Cannon Beach and its real estate is some of the most sought after in the state. This property will likely sell to a private party, possibly shutting the community out from a cherished location.”

The school district has also had conversations about the property with members of the Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes in the last week, Roley said. Officials from the tribe were unable to be reached for comment.

While there are many competing visions for the space, Steidel said it is a testament to the building’s versatility.

“I think all this interest shows the enormity of what it could be used for. What’s better than having a building that’s constantly used?” Steidel said.

Moving forward

With community support again on the rise, the city will continue to discuss funding options at an upcoming work session, as well as how it could be balanced with other capital projects. Some new ideas are already being explored, like researching whether some of the dollars allocated to the Tourism and Arts Commission could be reserved for running a community center. Other options, like floating a bond or fundraising, will be discussed, Steidel said.

While all five city councilors listed purchasing the school as a priority at a recent goal-setting retreat, Steidel was the only one to list it as No. 1.

“It’s doable right now. South Wind takes a lot of long-term planning. This is something achievable if people are behind it.”

Seaside, Astoria graduation rates see double-digit dips

Numbers are off, principals say

By Edward Stratton
and R.J. Marx
EO Media Group

Graduation rates in Astoria and Seaside slumped by about 10 percent last year in figures released by the state Department of Education. But local officials, including Seaside High School Principal Jeff Roberts and Astoria High School Principal Lynn Jackson, are scratching their heads over the numbers.

Astoria and Seaside, Clatsop County’s two largest school districts, each averaged more than 74 percent in 2016. But Astoria slipped to 63.3 percent last year, and Seaside to 66.7 percent.

“There’s a 7 percent discrepancy from my numbers to their numbers,” Jackson said, estimating his district’s four-year graduation rate at between 70 and 72 percent.

About five students counted by the state as dropouts had graduated last year, while several others had moved out of the school district, Jackson said.

The state defines on-time graduation as finishing in four years. Statewide, 76.7 percent of seniors finished with a diploma in four years, a nearly 2 percent increase from 2016 but still among the worst graduation rates in the nation. The national graduation rate in 2016 was 84 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The state’s numbers say 41 Seaside students did not graduate, using that number for calculations. That number should have been much lower, Roberts said.

Roberts said 133 students entered as freshmen at Seaside High School in 2013-14. Over the course of the four-year period that is measured the district had 24 of those students leave with codes that the Department of Education

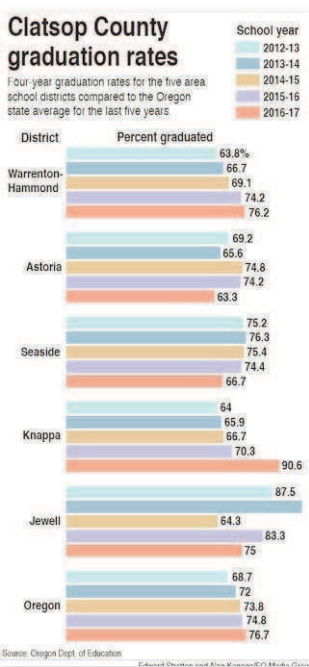
considers as drop-outs or not finishing in four years.

Some of those should not be considered dropouts, Roberts said.

“My math tells me that is 18 percent of that class that dropped out in that time frame, 31 of those 133 students left Seaside High School at some point to pursue their education in a manner that was deemed not to be considered a dropout, per ODE, which could include completing a GED program, transferring to another school in state, transferring to another school out of state, or enrolling in online school,” Roberts said.

If that number had been used, the graduation rate would have been similar to previous years, about 76 percent.

Warrenton-Hammond, the county’s third-largest and fastest-growing school district, posted a 76.2 percent four-year graduation rate last year, continuing a steady increase stretching back at least six years.



Warrenton High School Principal Rod Heyen estimated his graduation rate at 80 percent, equating to two or three more students than the state counted, but said overall he is pleased with the district’s progress.

Warrenton regularly averages the highest rate of student homelessness in the county, with many students forced to share housing with family and friends out of economic need. Heyen credited district staff and community partners for providing the necessary support such as food and clothing to keep students going to school.

Knappa High School improved from a 70 percent four-year graduation rate in 2016 to 90 percent last year, by far the highest in the county.

Knappa High School Principal Laurel Smalley said there’s no one magic bullet, but that the district has experienced a culture shift toward valuing education.

The graduation figures of Jewell, a tiny rural school district in the southeastern corner of the county, fluctuate wildly, with class sizes often below 15 students. The district graduated six out of eight students last year, according to the state.

Voters in 2016 approved about \$800 per student through Measure 98 to improve dropout prevention, collegiate offerings and career-technical programs. The state Legislature funded the measure at about \$400 per student.

The measure’s funding has been used by school districts for freshmen advising. Freshmen who stay on track and average good grades are dramatically more likely to graduate.

Seaside has yet to approach the state about the discrepancy. Meanwhile, they intend to work to improve their graduation rates, Roberts said.

“Our goal will always be for 100 percent of students to earn a high school diploma,” Roberts added. “It is certainly a concern and will remain a concern until we are able to work with our staff, parents, the students and community partners to consistently ensure our students earn a high school diploma.”

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