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Upper Marlboro seeks input on historic school's fate

County says final decision hasn't been made on whether to demolish Old Marlboro Elementary

by Erich Wagner, Staff Writer

Prince George's County officials say they are undecided on whether to demolish a historic building in Upper Marlboro to build a Family Justice Center, despite the town commissioners' unanimous vote last week to request a review of the plans and seek greater input on related decisions going forward.

County officials are considering razing the Old Marlboro Elementary School, an amalgam of two school buildings built in 1891 and 1921, which includes the grave of Revolutionary War and War of 1812 doctor William Beanes, but town officials would like to see the building preserved or restored so it can be used.

A final decision on whether to proceed with demolition hasn't been made, said Scott Peterson, a spokesman for Prince George's County Executive Rushern Baker (D), although an open bid for a contract to demolish the building is listed on a county Office of Central Services website.

Stephen Sonnett, president of the Upper Marlboro board of commissioners, criticized the county for moving forward with plans to demolish the building by seeking bids from contractors for the demolition without seeking input from the town and residents.

"We still don't know exactly what they're doing," Sonnett said. "They never made any of it public, so everything we've heard has been secondhand."

Betty Carlson-Jameson, a community planner for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, said she had been working on a study of the building for restoration and possible adaptive reuse, but when planners tried to examine the structural integrity of the building in March, the county denied them entry.

"The county let us in once back in 2010, when we first started the process," Carlson-Jameson said. "When we asked to gain entrance [again in March] as we were furthering the study with structural engineers, we couldn't get in."

Peterson said planning officials were not allowed access in March because the site is not considered “surplus” to the county’s needs.

“In March it would have been premature to let another entity to look at options for the building if we were going in another direction, had other plans, or hadn’t made a determination as to whether or not we needed the land,” Peterson said.

Peterson said in a statement that the county had received the town’s letter of requests and that it was in the process of preparing a response.

The town asked for a review of the planned demolition, not simply on historic preservation grounds, but questioning the feasibility of the proposed Family Justice Center — a one-stop shop providing judicial services for victims of domestic violence and other family justice issues — which would replace the vacant building.

Sonnett said that other such facilities around the country are typically located at population and transportation hubs.

“It should be where it’s easy for people to get to it,” Sonnett said. “Upper Marlboro is not exactly a transportation hub. It’s not very easy to get here.”

Brian Callicott, 44, of Upper Marlboro said at this point the town just wants a seat at the negotiating table as to whether to demolish the building.

“We just want to say, ‘Hey, please listen to our concerns,’” Callicott said. “We want to work through this together, but the only way to do that at this point is to put some stop signs in their way.”

Sonnett said the letter is just a first step. If the county moves forward with its plans, the town will have to become “more adversarial.”

Dave Turner, chairman of the county’s Historic Preservation Commission, said that if and when the county applies for a historic area work permit, required for any changes to a county-registered historic site, the commission would likely encourage a work group consisting of representatives of the county, the town and the historic preservation community to iron out a compromise.

“We might look to [the town], the judges and the preservation group to come up with something we can consider in addition to some basic issues, so we’re not forced to just hammer something out ourselves,” Turner said. “...I do think there’s a win-win out there.”

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