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QUEEN ANNE'S COUNTY

News

WRUS purchases armory building

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CENTREVILLE Representatives of Wye River Upper School had indications from Centreville officials that they would look favorably on a proposal to relocate the school to the National Guard Armory building before they signed a contract to purchase the property last week.

Both the town council and the planning commission had a chance to review the independent high school's plan to move from rented space at Chesapeake College and purchase and renovate the historic downtown structure at two meetings on June 3 and June 16.

After discussing issues including parking and remediation of hazardous substances in the South Commerce Street building, which dates to 1926, both bodies gave a preliminary thumbs up to the project, although a neighboring resident attending the June 16 planning meeting said that she remained concerned about several aspects of the proposal.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL HURST
The former National Guard Armory has been purchased by Wye River Upper School.

All council members and planning commissioners expressed preliminary support for the project after learning from school officials that the pastor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church had said the parish would likely be willing to let the school use their parking facilities. Along with other renovations, the church is scheduled to complete a new parking lot on its property, which is just north of the Armory building.

Parking in the town's central business district is still considered to be an issue, in spite of expanded facilities soon to open behind the district court building. A residential development for senior citizens in the vicinity of the armory had been nixed by the town, school officials were told, because of concerns about passenger pick ups and drops offs worsening an already problematic traffic situation on Commerce Street.

WRUS Head of School Chrissy Aull told town officials that Father Chris Jubinski of St. Paul's had indicated in a preliminary discussion that spaces in the church's lot could be available to the school on weekdays.

Both the council and the planning commission said that the school, which serves students with specific educational needs including dyslexia and ADHD, would be a welcome addition to the town and that the provisions for parking solved one of the major hurdles that could stand in the way of the school gaining formal approval to proceed with renovations of the building.

Caroline Huddleston, however, whose house abuts the armory site, voiced concerns about a lack of notification to neighboring property owners as well as noise and safety issues.

Huddleston said residents whose property is in the immediate vicinity should have been involved from the proposal's inception.

Renovations currently underway at St. Paul's as well as the removal of two mature trees on the church's property had escalated noise levels, she explained.

Huddleston said a school that could one day have as many as 100 students, could wreak havoc on her home-based business and that construction noise and asbestos contamination could also result from the renovations.

Aull told Huddleston the Planning Commission meeting at which she spoke was in fact the project's inception.

School officials said that the school was expanding at a slow pace. Only 40 students have graduated WRUS since

its founding in 2002, they pointed out. Lunch hours at the high school would be a lot quieter than what neighbors of a school for younger students would experience, Aull offered.

Zoning Administrator Eva Kerchner said the buffering trees had been removed because of damage during February's snowstorms and that replacement trees would be required on the church property.

School officials admitted that the inspection of the building had indicated substantial investment would need to be made in mitigating the asbestos that is present inside. Before the building could be occupied it would have to meet rigorous state standards for building safety, they said, and WRUS would be doing a public service by preventing further possible leaching of asbestos from the armory building into the surrounding area.

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