

Avoca Center Rehab Off the Table

by Emily Spectre • December 20, 2016
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WILMETTE – Avoca School District 37 will not renovate the Avoca Center, as decided by an unanimous school board vote at a meeting on December 15. The district has been contemplating what to do with the aging building, located at 3013 Illinois Road, since a public meeting on the issue in late October.

Superintendent Kevin Jauch told *DailyNorthShore.com* that the large financial cost of renovating the building was a factor behind the board's decision. The district would be required to sell \$7 million worth of bonds, which would cost the district about \$9 million to \$10 million after factoring in interest. "We just didn't feel that was fiscally responsible for our community," he said.

The Avoca Center, situated on more than four acres adjacent to Marie Murphy Middle School, was built as a school called Avoca East Elementary School. But the Baby Bust of the late 1960s and 1970s led to the school's closure in 1977, and the building was renamed the Avoca Center. The Avoca Center is in disrepair, with aging boilers, tanks and pipes dating from the building's construction in 1957.

The district leases the building — since 1995 The Arlyn School, a therapeutic day school, and One Hope United, a daycare and preschool, have been tenants — and a renovation would require the district to lock in tenants with a 20-year lease to cover the cost of the loan. Jauch also noted that renovation costs might have potentially increased taxes for residents.

The buildings that house Marie Murphy Middle School and Avoca West Elementary School also were built in 1957. Those buildings also require upgrades, and Jauch noted that the district wanted to prioritize buildings that it uses. "It plays against our ability to borrow," he said, if the district sold bonds to repair The Avoca Center.

The school board met as a Committee of the Whole on December 1 and reached a consensus that the district should not renovate the Avoca Center, according to Jauch. Both tenants were notified of the decision and served a 12-month notice on December 5. Jauch said the district is not telling the tenants they must vacate within 12 months, but rather that the current lease will expire in that time frame. The district may decide to negotiate more months to help the tenants with their transition.

One of the concerns for the district is maintenance of the building. "Our biggest concern as a district is whether those boilers will hold up over the winter," Jauch said. Negotiations will likely shift that burden away from the district to maintain the building if the tenants choose to stay longer than 12 months.

As for the future of the building, Jauch said the district is considering its options. "At this point, with 12 months until the lease runs out, we are trying to revisit all of our options," he said. At the October public meeting, a potential residential housing development had been discussed, as well as the Wilmette Park District purchasing the building. "Right now those are standing tall as the two most prominent options," Jauch said.

While Park District Director Steve Wilson indicated at the October meeting it was unlikely it would have community support to purchase the building, Jauch said he has since met with Park District officials to discuss that option again. "I have reached out to Steve just to say we have served notice and if the Park District is interested, and we can find a mutually beneficial option, we will consider it," Jauch said.

Jauch was clear that the district has no intention of selling the Avoca Park that is behind the building. Those fields are utilized by Marie Murphy for physical education classes, sports teams and school gatherings. The Park District also leases the fields for sports teams. "It's a great piece of land," Jauch said.