

Avoca District 36 officials make case for selling old Avoca Center



Kevin Jauch, superintendent of Avoca School District 37, listens Oct. 26 in the auditorium of the former Avoca Center School, 3013 Illinois Road in Wilmette, to questions about the school's future. District officials said at the meeting that they must choose between expensive renovations of the building, or selling it and the more than 4 acres of property it stands on. (Kathy Routliffe / Pioneer Press)

By **Kathy Routliffe**
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Despite rainy weather and a Cubs playoff game, administrators and school board members at Avoca School District 37 drew roughly 40 people to the former Avoca Center school, 3013 Illinois Road, on Oct. 26 to discuss the building's future.

Members of the district's school board may decide at a Nov. 3 committee of the whole session whether to keep the school and consider how to pay for an estimated \$6.7 million in necessary repairs, or to end their leases with two long-term tenants and look to sell the more than 4-acre property, Supt. Kevin Jauch said at the meeting.

"As a district, we are at a crossroads," Jauch told the audience of district residents, many of them neighbors of the property, and people connected with the building tenants. "We can't just ignore this anymore."

Jauch, along with Beth Dever, chief financial officer for the district, told listeners that the costs of maintaining Avoca Center, which opened in 1957 to handle a student enrollment boom but closed in 1977 when enrollments plummeted, go beyond the \$230,971 the district has spent on average over the past eight years.

It also includes between eight and 15 hours of work a week by district employees to keep the school running, plus even more administrative hours, Dever said.

Jauch said the district would probably have to issue bonds to pay for repairs to Avoca Center, including an estimated \$3.5 million to update mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems. Breaking even on the total cost, even with potentially higher rents, could take between 37 and a half years to 61 years, Dever said.

Selling the land, which is zoned for single family residential use, would put it back on the tax rolls and bring in new property taxes estimated at roughly \$120,000 per year, which could help lighten property tax loads for district residents, Jauch said.

District 37 has rented one wing of Avoca Center for the last 21 years to Arlyn School, a private school for students with emotional problems, and for the same period to One Hope United, a private day care. Their leases run through 2020, and require the district to provide them with advance notice of any changes.

The leases also require the district to help its tenants find new quarters, including any need to temporarily relocate the tenants should the district decided to maintain the leases, Jauch said.

At the meeting, Arlyn School founder Judy Goldstein said that she and the school's staff "love being here.

"Even if we temporarily relocate, we'd be delighted to move back," Goldstein said. "The district has been very supportive."

Wilmette resident Larry Swibel was one of several people who asked about how much control the district might really exercise over any developer who bought the property. Jauch said the district could put conditions on the sale – such as a limit on the number of single-family lots the property could be divided into – but some at the meeting worried that developers could eventually find ways around those restrictions.

The district's research appears to show that the property could be divided into about a dozen 13,400-square-foot lots, which Jauch said before the meeting would be slightly smaller than comparable lots on nearby Hibbard or Iroquois roads, but larger than those on nearby Virginia Lane.

Jauch fielded other questions with the occasional help of Wilmette Community Development Director John Adler, and Wilmette Park District Director Steve Wilson, including one from a neighbor asking if any new residential development on the property would require building a new road to access the development. Adler said that would be the case. After one questioner asked if the park district could buy the school, Wilson said that, among other considerations, the district doesn't have the means to buy it.

Wilmette resident Jim Kerwin, who lives on nearby Indianwood Drive, asked what the district would do with the money it might make on a sale. He suggested that sale proceeds should go into a capital improvement fund for the district's school; Jauch told him that the district would put some of the money back into Marie Murphy and Avoca West schools.

"The thought of them being able to get capital to spend on the school, and increase the property tax base at the same time, could be one of the most positive impacts Avoca could have on its residents, outside of the education of children," Kerwin said after the meeting.

Jeffrey Greengoss, president of the Avoca District 37 school board, said after the meeting that he appreciated the the input from attendees.

"This was a nice crowd, especially considering the weather and the fact that the Cubs were playing," he said.

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