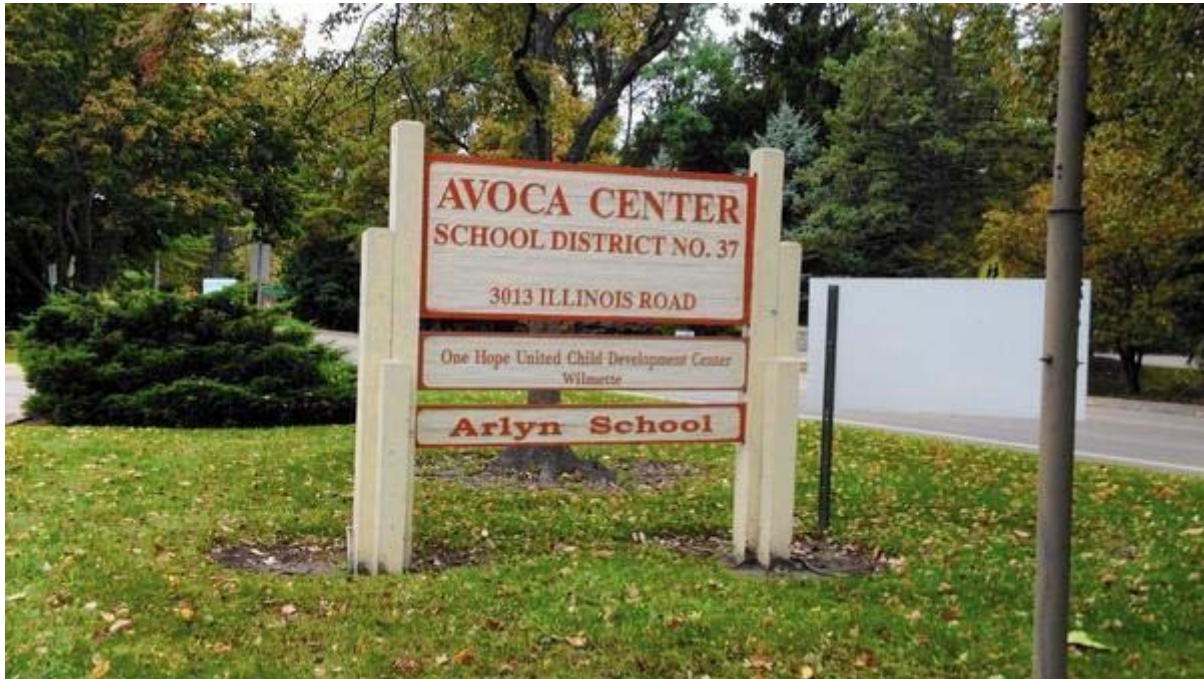


Meeting on Avoca Central's future set for Wednesday



Officials at Avoca School District 37 want to hear from district residents about what the future of the former Avoca Central School, shown here on Oct. 20, should be, and are holding an Oct. 26 meeting to gauge the response. (Kathy Routliffe / Pioneer Press)

By **Kathy Routliffe**
Pioneer Press

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Administrators and school board members at Avoca School District 37 hope that a Wednesday night meeting with district residents will help them decide whether to sell or renovate Avoca Central School, 3013 Illinois Road in Wilmette.

The school, which sits on more than four acres of land adjacent to the district's Marie Murphy School, has been rented out for decades, but district officials say its deteriorating condition means they must decide between renovating it for up to \$6.7 million, or selling the property, potentially for residential development.

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The meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. at Avoca Central. It will include a presentation on the building's history and the options the district is considering, Supt. Kevin Jauch said. In addition to being able to ask questions and give feedback, attendees will be able to tour the building, he said.

Jauch said the school board has struggled for several years over what to do with Avoca Central, which opened in 1957 to handle a post-World War II student population boom that continued until the late 1960s. The school closed in 1977 after district student enrollment plummeted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he said.

"At its peak, our district had more than 1,500 students," Jauch said. "Currently we have 744."

The district draws students from Wilmette, Northfield, Winnetka and Glenview.

Jauch said the district's enrollment figures have remained relatively steady since 1992, rising only from 611 to 744 students.

For the last 21 years, District 37 has rented one wing of Avoca Central to Arlyn School, a private school for students with emotional problems, and 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 lease also requires the district to help its tenants find new quarters, Jauch said.

The district's annual rental income is now a little over \$400,000, Jauch said. Over the past eight years, the rent has averaged \$392,201, according to figures from Jauch's Avoca Central presentation.

Annual spending to maintain the building has averaged \$230,971 over the same eight-year period, he said, leaving an average net income of \$161,230.

However, the school's physical plant is eroding, he said; its boilers are original to 1957, and the building has asbestos floor tiles and pipe wrapping.

District officials estimate that it would cost a minimum of \$5.1 million to bring it up to current school life and safety standards, a figure that includes \$3.5 million to update mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, a total of \$412,674 to replace ceilings and floors, almost \$145,000 to renovate washrooms and \$150,000 to take care of tile and pipe-wrapping asbestos, plus \$850,740 in contractor costs.

If other recommended work is added to the bill, Jauch said, such as replacing Avoca Central's doors, roof and entrance ramp, the cost jumps to \$6.7 million.

The money necessary to repair and modernize Avoca Central might be better used to maintain Avoca's two active schools, school board president Jeffrey Greengoss said.

The land is zoned for single-family residential purposes, Jauch said. Research the district has done appears to show that the property could be divided into about a dozen 13,400 square foot lots, which he said would be slightly smaller than comparable lots on nearby Hibbard or Iroquois roads, but larger than those on nearby Virginia Lane.

A 2013 property assessment set the value of the land at "several million" dollars, Jauch said.

Greengoss agreed, saying, "It's a very nice piece of property. There's very little open property in Wilmette. I don't see anything in Wilmette that could be developed for single family homes, like this could."

Greengoss said he would personally support using the property for that purpose and added, "We never wanted to be landlords. It just developed over the years."

For more information on Avoca Central, visit <http://avoca37.org/avocacenter/>

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