

# MPS, city grapple with deciding school facilities

By Alan J. Borsuk | June 25, 2011

So we've got all these empty school buildings in Milwaukee at the same time we've got schools or potential schools or potential schools that need decent buildings. Resolving this doesn't sound like the most complicated issue facing the human race.

Almost needless to say, it's complicated.

For quite a while, there was not much action on the empty-school front. Now, there's a lot, including plans being developed on two different (and potentially competing) tracks.

Making maximum use of these assets will take cooperation between leaders of Milwaukee Public Schools and non-MPS schools, who are not known for cooperating across turf lines. But there is some chance that at least hunks of the empty-school issue will be worked out cooperatively and to the actual benefit of school kids. In fact, a major example of that is unfolding without public controversy right now.

School Board members last week were given a list of 29 properties owned by MPS that were considered "surplus." Several of them are not schools. Several currently are being leased or used in some way. When you boil it all down, there are maybe a dozen that seem to be good candidates to be used as schools.

With green lights being given by the state Legislature to open more charter schools (independent or semi-independent, nonreligious, publicly funded school) and private schools in the publicly funded voucher program,

more people are eyeing empty MPS buildings. Getting use of them could save millions of dollars, compared with the alternatives.

There has been action on four fronts:

**A new state law.** Spurred by people such as state Sen. Alberta Darling (R-River Hills) and Milwaukee Common Council President Willie Hines, the Legislature passed a bill that brings City Hall much more into the action. The mayor and Common Council, not the School Board, appear to now have control over at least some of the empty buildings.

Until now, the School Board has had control and has been highly resistant to selling buildings to non-MPS schools. There is less sympathy for that notion in City Hall. The law, at minimum, puts pressure on MPS to find good use or let go of some of its property.

Dennis Conta, key charter advocate, said the new law creates "a chance to address what is arguably the most significant obstacle facing charter schools in Milwaukee, and that is the lack of facilities."

**A new MPS facilities plan.** Superintendent Gregory Thornton and the School Board are launching a process to come up with a long-term facilities plan for MPS. Thornton says the facilities plan isn't just about buildings. It's aimed at seeing what kinds of schools Milwaukee needs, where they ideally should be located and how they can meet "a standard of care" for educating children.



“I’m optimistic that we’re going to come away with a really good plan, not only for what we need to do with buildings,” Thornton said.

MPS officials said the district has a \$670,160 contract with the Jacobs Team, a consulting firm based in Houston, to develop the plan. The public input part of that process will begin with a meeting from 6 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday at Sarah Scott Middle School, 1017 N. 12th St., which is one of the buildings on the surplus list.

In an interesting move, the School Board is expected this week to approve taking the “surplus” designation off all the properties now carrying that label. Thornton says that will allow MPS to undertake the planning process with a clean slate because it may want to reopen some vacant schools and close existing ones.

However, the new state law says that City Hall can sell or lease any property labeled surplus as of Jan. 1, 2011. Can MPS reclaim control of those buildings now? Call in the attorneys.

More broadly, MPS and non-MPS advocates are not really on the same page. Thornton wants to bring as many schools as possible, including independent charters, under the MPS umbrella. Many independent charters have been reluctant (at best) to align with MPS because it tends to be too controlling for them. The plan of non-MPS folks is likely to be to ply as many buildings away from MPS as they can, while the MPS folks aim to bring them into the fold. This could end well. Or not.

**Reality happens.** For several years, the pace of change on the school scene has been furious at every front. That continues.

This summer, Dover and Tippecanoe schools in Bay View are moving into the former Fritsche Middle School. Fritsche has moved over to Bay View High School, which is being renamed Bay View Middle and High School. Wings Academy, a charter school primarily for kids with special needs such as attention deficit disorders or dyslexia, is moving from rented space into the Dover building.

There are more moves, particularly on the north side. Reality on the ground keeps changing. Who can keep up? I admit, not me.

**Milwaukee College Prep.** The high-performing charter school is about to take over two MPS buildings. Thirty-Eighth Street School, 2623 N. 38th St., vacant for four years, and Lloyd Street School, which became surplus this month, will become campuses of the expanding College Prep operation. The charter school will pay MPS \$1 a year, plus all operating expenses, for each of the buildings and has an option to buy them.

This was a rare step. Will it be a precedent for more such deals?

In general, the scene seems to be set for doing a better job of putting the best possible schools in the best possible buildings.

“It certainly makes sense, if our long-term goal is to provide as many good options to kids as possible,” said Heather Heaviland, who works for IFF, a private nonprofit that is involved in helping charter and private schools get up and running in high-needs areas in Milwaukee.

Referring to what has gone on within MPS recently, which is mostly due to budget cuts coming from Madison, Thornton said, “We’ve been so busy reacting. We need to think forward now. Where does this city go?”

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