

NEWS FROM THE PORTLAND AREA AND THE NORTHWEST



Photos by BRENT WOJAHN/THE OREGONIAN

Washington-Monroe High School sits on acres of central-eastside land with gorgeous views of downtown. But slow planning processes and a weak housing market have left the old school boarded up and wearing down five years after Portland Public Schools decided to sell the site.

Setbacks keep Portland classic in state of ruin

The market stalls plans for prime eastside acreage

By **ANDY DWORKIN**
THE OREGONIAN

Like an incorrigible student, Washington-Monroe High School is full of promise but keeps getting held back.

In 2003, more than 20 years after it last held regular classes, Portland Public Schools decided to sell the august brick building and surrounding property in Southeast Portland.

But five years later, boards and metal grates still cover the windows. Crumpled cigarette cartons and beer bottles pile behind the urine-stained west steps. A small tree has rooted in a carved stone lintel above a doorway.

Though the school district has picked a

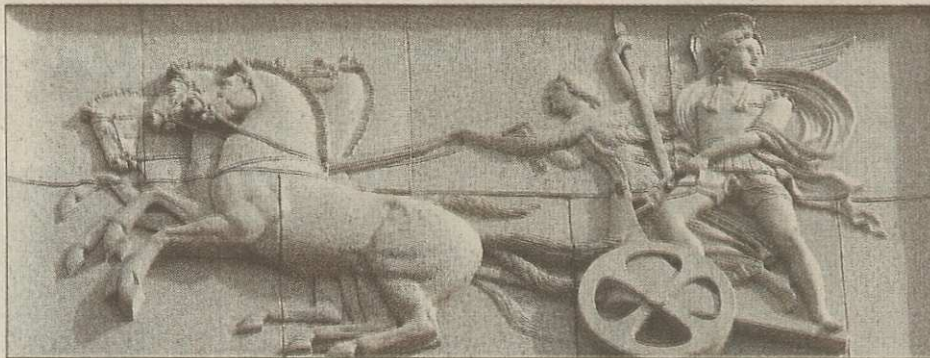


developer to build housing on much of the land and the city spent \$3.8 million to buy the rest for a community center, neither project has made much headway. Between plodding public planning processes and the swooning real estate market, construction may not start on the historic site until 2010.

“The economic conditions made this process a little slower than we were hoping,” said Kerry Hampton, who manages property for the schools.

The central-city parcel should have been an easy sell, Hampton said.

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Classically themed reliefs, pillars and inscribed quotes add to the dignified feel of the four-story brick school, built in 1922.

High school: Parking space issues not yet worked out

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"It's about seven acres with views of downtown in the middle of the city," he said. "So it's a jewel."

But at least two other factors explain why nothing has happened: parking and neighborhood involvement.

The community center and housing development are so closely tied that it's hard for them to proceed independently and they are largely linked through parking, said Kia Selley, development manager for the Portland Development Commission.

Beam Development, the school district's pick to build the housing project, has said the site isn't big enough to hold all the housing and parking needed to make the project profitable, Selley said. The only way Beam can move forward is to put more retail space and housing in a remodeled school building and have extra parking added to the planned community center.

The city's Parks Bureau does plan to include parking for the housing complex, perhaps building 350 or 400 total spaces underground, Selley said. But underground garages are expensive, and Parks Commissioner Dan Saltzman said City Council members couldn't "come forward with straight faces with a \$10 million request for a parking garage."

Saltzman said Portland will need \$20 million to \$40 million to build the whole community center, which will have to come from a bond request. That won't go to voters until November 2010, he said.

So the housing project can't move forward without the parking plan, and that can't move forward without money. "There's a little bit of the chicken and the egg with respect to park-

Hallowed history

Late 1800s: Portland's first east-side secondary school is built on the site.

1909: The school is named for George Washington.

1922: The current brick building is built after a fire destroys the school.

1962: Two-time Nobel Prize-winner Linus Pauling gets his degree, awarded 45 years after he left high school because of a technicality.

1977: Monroe High School, once an all-girls polytechnic school, merges into Washington High School.

1980: As enrollment declines, Portland Public Schools decides to close the high school. The district puts offices there for a while.

2003: The school district decides to sell Washington-Monroe to raise money.

2004: The City Council votes to buy a big chunk of the site for a community center.

2005: Portland spends more than \$1 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency readying the building to hold 1,000 people displaced by Hurricane Katrina. The government sends few people, so the school closes five months later, after local officials help 260 families find homes and social services.

ing," Saltzman said.

Lengthy efforts to get community input, especially from the influential Buckman Neighborhood Association, also slowed things down. Neighbors and developers eventually agreed on the site's needs: a big activity center with a pool and owner-occupied housing. The latter is "a very important component," neighborhood association chair Susan Lindsay said, since the 2000 Census showed 84 percent of Buckman neighborhood residents rent their homes.

It took more than a year to agree on that plan, school district real estate manager Doug Capps said, followed by an extended contracting process to get more bids. So the district didn't pick Beam as the developer until early last year, just as the condo market hit the skids. Beam and the district are still negotiating purchase of the school site, appraised at \$4.65 million,

and a nearby lot valued at \$4.5 million.

Beam owner Brad Malsin said he's looking for ways to move the project forward, maybe even before 2010. "But a lot of it depends on the market" and on getting parking spaces, he said. And the company is having to explore options including building rental units that could be converted into owner-occupied condos when the market's better.

"Everybody, including us, wants home ownership on the site," Malsin said. "Obviously the market didn't."

Fortunately for the city, the parks project is picking up just as the housing half slows. Oregon's congressional delegation snagged \$670,000 in federal money to help design the community center. Saltzman said the city will kick in another \$330,000. The \$1 million planning will soon get under way, helping nail down how many

parking spaces the project can have and how big a bond the city must seek.

Neighbors such as Todd Putnam, whose Framing Resource shop faces the school across Stark Street, hopes that progress comes soon. A nice new development "would be a big boon to the neighborhood" that is seeing economic revival with projects including Nostrana restaurant and a new vegan mini-mall.

While lots of people now use the schoolyard as a park, Putnam said he's also seen kids spray graffiti there and junkies shooting up — though the problems have eased since parks crews cut down big bushes.

"I think the most prime piece of vacant property in all of Portland is right across the street," Putnam said. "I'm baffled that nothing has been done with that all these years."

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