

## To Demolish or Renovate: Beacon Hill's 1915 Campus Building In Limbo

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The Beacon Hill Elementary School building was constructed in 1915 and now sits vacant on the grounds of Beacon Hill Academy. Photo: Bonnie Arbittier

With boarded-up windows, a cracked brick facade, and rusted metal structures, the last remnants of the defunct Beacon Hill Elementary School's 1915 campus sits abandoned at 1411 West Ashby Pl.

City, school district, and neighborhood leaders are showing renewed interest in the building, which has sat vacant for decades on the same property as San Antonio Independent School District's Beacon Hill Academy, built in 1999.

A March 1 deadline looms, at which time Councilman Roberto Treviño (D1) has promised to present a plan for the dilapidated building's future.

Treviño, who as a registered architect brings a passion for historic preservation to his urban core district, wants to save the building and renovate it.

Not everyone agrees with Treviño. In the past, SAISD has repeatedly sought permission to raze the structure, and neighborhood leaders have supported those requests.

In the past five years, Beacon Hill community members have called for the building's demolition, starting a petition in 2015 that garnered about 70 signatures. Signers called the old campus "an eyesore" and lamented health and safety issues that come with a century-old building.

But the district's repeated requests to demolish the building have been unsuccessful. In 2015, members of the Office of Historic Preservation (OHP) and the subcommittee for designation and demolition visited the structure and told SAISD officials' demolition would not be approved because the building was eligible for historic designation.

Since then, the fate of the building has been in limbo. SAISD lacks City approval and the money to fund either demolition or a complete renovation.

Kamal ElHabr, SAISD's assistant superintendent of facilities planning and construction, said renovations would require a tremendous amount of work: environmental abatement, improvements to the basement floating slab, stairwell supports, updates to the brick facade, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and more.

"There is no water, sewer, electricity, internet access in the building," he said. "New services have to be brought in from the street level from the purveyors. Quite a bit of work needs to happen in addition to the restoration work."

ElHabr said the district hasn't done a detailed cost assessment, but a complete renovation could cost between \$5 million and \$6 million. A teardown, on the other hand, would cost between \$250,000 and \$300,000.

Demolishing the 103-year-old structure would still require some work, including environmental abatements, but it wouldn't be as extensive as a restoration, ElHabr said.

"The district really has no use [for it]," ElHabr said. "The [academy] campus is pretty self-sufficient and the reason the campus [and community members] really pushed ... to [demolish] is so the kids can have more playground."

Community leaders say that while they appreciate the historic nature of the building, they want students to have more space and be protected from the health concerns the building presents.

Former Beacon Hill Neighborhood Association President Cynthia Spielman said lead paint and asbestos tend to be problems in older buildings.

“I’m assuming that, because all of the buildings from that time period have lead paint,” she said. “All of the buildings from that time period use asbestos. Living in this neighborhood, there isn’t a house that doesn’t have lead paint.”



*Former Beacon Hill Neighborhood Association President Cynthia Spielman. Photo: Scott Ball*

Beyond that, the school is undergoing a transition to become a pre-kindergarten through eighth grade academy, which would increase student enrollment.

“The school is desperate for that space,” Spielman said. “They have traffic issues, they have growth issues. They are sided by a business on one side and by the railroad on the other side.”

In that vein, Martinez said she was especially pleased to see a partnership forged between the Beacon Hill Academy and **COPS Metro Alliance**, which resulted in a community forum held on Jan. 30. Martinez said the meeting was standing-room only.

COPS Metro, a group known for working to secure commitments, collected assurances from elected officials in attendance that action would be taken.

Martinez committed to finding avenues for funding demolition, should renovation not be feasible.

Treviño attended the meeting via FaceTime and recommitted to providing a plan for the structure by March 1. He noted that his priority is renovation, so he is studying how that effort might be financed.

“I think we can close that [funding] gap quickly,” Treviño said.

One of the tools Treviño is examining are historic tax credits, he said, which can offset the cost of building rehabilitation by at least 40 percent.

In a draft of the plan Treviño sent to the *Rivard Report*, the OHP outlines how SAISD could take advantage of a Texas Historic Preservation Tax Credit, which would allow the district to claim 25 percent of eligible rehab costs as a tax credit. Another option, the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentive Program would allow a 20 percent tax credit for renovation costs.

Both of these credits would require that the structure be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. According to the draft document, the old Beacon Hill building is eligible for this designation and OHP could help the district get such a designation for the building.

The document also suggests potential financial support from Community Development Block Grants to assist with environmental abatement.



Councilman Roberto Treviño (D1). Photo: Bonnie Arbittier

Finally, the plan proposes that SAISD use the space creatively. If the district wishes to keep the building, it could use it for school programming or special curricula.

“SAISD also has the option to lease or sell to a nonprofit to allow for community-based programming,” the document says, listing some potential programs that could occur at the property, such as an arts after-school program, senior-youth mentoring programs, and arts programs.

Regardless of what the plan will eventually promote, Beacon Hill community members are eager to see some action.

Martinez said this anticipation comes from years of stalled discussions about the historic building. ElHabr said the district requested demolition of the building as early as the mid-1990s.

“This is a situation that has been around for years,” Martinez said. “These families have been asking for action for a very long time. It is the lack of action that has been frustrating for this community.”

Come March 1, if it doesn’t seem like there is a plan to preserve the building, Martinez said the district should “move forward to address the concerns of that community.”