

City should let SAISD tear down old school

By Josh Brodesky

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The chain-link fence went up last spring. It wrapped around the playground at Beacon Hill Academy, and cut off part of a field where kids used to play and run free.

No one knows when children will play in this space again. The new school year begins Aug. 13, and the fence remains. That's because no one knows if the city of San Antonio will allow San Antonio Independent School District to tear down a yellow-brick school house on the property. City officials, elected and unelected, want to save the building, which they say has the potential to be historic.



*Children are fenced off from a playground at Beacon Hill Academy because the building is considered unsafe. Parents want a solution.
Photo: Josh Brodesky /Express-News*

They want to save it even if that means students at Beacon Hill Academy can't use the playground or field next to the building. You see, the building is in rough shape. It's been vacant for 20 years. It has its own fence around it because the floors and rooftop are rotting and metal joists are rusting. It's no place you would ever want to be, but just the kind of place a kid might explore.

Built in 1915, the building is next to the playground and the field. A report commissioned by SAISD warned of falling debris in the case of severe winds. And so more fences went up around the playground and the field.

"The fence went up to protect the children from (potential) falling debris," said Michelle Ricondo, a **COPS/ Metro** leader who attended Beacon Hill as a child and whose son and daughter are students there.

There is a courtyard and some small patches of grass where students can play outside, she and others said. There is even a strip of grass behind the school, next to a residential street. Sometimes the kids "play" there with supervision.

"There is no shade on that portion, and there is no fencing on that portion," Ricondo said.

But there is shade at the playground and room to run on that field. If the kids were allowed.

Ricondo said she doesn't care if the building is restored or torn down. She just wants something to happen so kids can again use the playground and field. To that point, signs from a recent COPS / Metro press conference hang from the school's outermost fence, begging for action.

“Our kids matter,” one says.

“We need a solution,” another says.

“Kids matter too!”

This building has been a source of debate between the city and district for years. Should it be renovated and restored? Should it be torn down? Round and round the questions go. The SAISD board recently voted to pursue demolition, but the city has to grant a permit. It could reject the request and designate the building as historic.

“The building continues to become more dilapidated,” SAISD Superintendent Pedro Martinez said. “It’s becoming now a bigger safety concern. We have expressed that to the city multiple times.” And multiple times, Martinez said, City Councilman Roberto Treviño has said just imagine what this building could be if it were restored.

“The councilman has promised resources,” Martinez said. “I am not blaming him, but nothing has materialized.”

In an interview, Treviño, an architect, expressed sympathy for the students and families and talked about finding a solution. He’d love to see Child Advocates of San Antonio occupy a renovated building.

“We all agree that something must happen, and how do we balance that with the wants of the community?” he said.

By he also said: “I think philosophically, we should always be working toward saving buildings. Demolition is kind of a death penalty.”

Likewise, Shanon Miller, director of the city’s Office of Historic Preservation, said the city has produced its own study that refutes the district’s study about the building’s dangers. While the district has informally estimated any renovation would cost \$6 million (demolition would be up to \$250,000), Miller is skeptical and would like to see a formal estimate. Besides, she said, historic tax credits could cover a significant chunk of any renovation.

All reasonable positions — except the children can’t play in the playground or field. The desire to preserve what once was is commendable, but in this case it obscures the present.

The building belongs to SAISD, which just laid off teachers. It has not been designated as historic. No one has emerged to purchase and renovate it.

It’s time to move forward, and let the kids play.

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