

Tenants found for vacant schools

Community agencies seek space for expansion

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NOTE: CONTRIBUTING: Staff writer Mick Hinton

SETTING IT STRAIGHT A story that appeared in Wednesday editions of the newspaper reported Eagle Ridge Institute, a nonprofit group treating mentally ill patients, will lease the former Gateway Academy, 721 W Britton Road. The institute will not treat patients at this location, but will open a community center to serve youth and families. (07/24/03)

Four vacant buildings in the Oklahoma City School District soon will have new tenants, as the school board this week approved negotiations with community agencies.

The board approved a recommendation Monday to allow district staff to negotiate with three organizations to lease or buy buildings being emptied under the MAPS for Kids plan.

Neighborhoods Engaged in School Transformation, a joint citizen/school district committee, recommended the original Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School at 1537 NE 24 be leased to Marcus Garvey Charter School and the former Gateway School at 721 W Britton Road be leased to the Eagle Ridge Institute, a private nonprofit group that treats certain mentally ill patients.

The neighborhood group recommended Lafayette School at 500 SW 44 be sold to the Variety Health Center, an organization that provides maternal and child health care to low-income families.

The new Independence Charter High School will be housed in the former Harding Middle School, 3333 N Shartel, district officials said. Charter school officials agreed to pay \$10,000 for the use of the school for 11 months, beginning next month.

NEST Chairman Jim Sconzo said his group has cautioned the community that tenants might not be found for the nearly two dozen schools that will close under the MAPS for Kids plan.

"We have been very fortunate this time around with several organizations looking ahead and seeing the possibilities and positive benefits to moving into these school buildings," Sconzo said. "Neighborhoods don't want an empty building sitting out there. It's just not good for the community."

In the first transformation project, former Garden Oaks Elementary School was transformed this year into a community center for residents in the northeast part of town.

Sconzo said summer youth programs and senior citizens activities are happening at the Garden Oaks site.

Sherry Fair, spokeswoman for Oklahoma City Public Schools, said transformation committee members are conscientious about finding tenants who will add to the quality of life of the communities.

Fair said state law does not stipulate who can lease or buy a building from the school districts.

"Typically in the past, it has been a practice of the district not to lease to people who are going to run a

competing public K-12 school," she said.

The program is a collaborative effort among the Community Action Agency, Possibilities: Neighbors in Action, the city of Oklahoma City, the Metropolitan Library System, the United Way of Central Oklahoma, the Oklahoma City Public Schools Foundation, the Urban League, the Oklahoma Institute of Child Advocacy, Neighborhood Alliance and the school district.

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