

Downtown historic site in Upper Marlboro in danger of demolition

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Stephen Sonnett was shocked to get a phone call from a potential bidder asking about construction rules for tearing down a historic site in downtown Upper Marlboro.

Sonnett, president of the Upper Marlboro Board of Town Commissioners, said he and other residents were surprised that the town had not yet been consulted on the issue, especially because the site in question — the Old Marlboro Elementary School building — is listed on the Prince George's County historic registry. Sites on the registry are protected from exterior property changes until permission is given from the county Planning Department's Historic Preservation Commission.

"People started to reminisce, because about half of the people," at a regularly scheduled October town meeting, "had gone to school there," Sonnett said. "There were some taken aback that we hadn't been informed of it."

The county plans to demolish the school building, at Elm Street and Gov. Oden Bowie Drive, because officials say it is vacant and "dilapidated," but many residents want to see the building preserved or rehabilitated.

The site where the Old Marlboro Elementary School sits, on a 6.7-acre county-owned lot, has been on the Inventory of Historic Resources since 1986.

According to county planning records, the site contains the Old Marlboro High School/Marlboro Academy, built in 1921; the Old Marlboro Elementary School, built in 1896; and the grave site of Dr. William Beanes, a doctor who treated U.S. soldiers in the Revolutionary War and was captured by British troops during the War of 1812.

Howard Berger, supervisor of the Historic Preservation Commission's staff, said that the school probably closed about 1974, when the building's deed was transferred from Prince George's County public schools to the county. It was then used for a number of purposes, including housing the county's Sheriff's Office until about 2003 when it became vacant.

Monica Johnson, director of the county's Office of Central Services — which handles the management of county properties and facilities — said that OCS had planned to tear down the building for 18 months but that officials did not realize the site was on the county's historic registry.

Johnson said OCS still plans to demolish the building because it is "dilapidated" and "structurally unsafe." In an attempt to consolidate county operations on its properties and avoid having to rent

spaces and buildings, Johnson said, the agency tentatively plans to build a family justice center and a new headquarters for the Prince George's sheriff's office.

"Now that [the building's historic status] has come to our attention, we realize there's a process that needs to be taken," Johnson said.

George Leonnig, an Upper Marlboro resident and former town commissioner, said he couldn't understand how the county could overlook the historic nature of the building. He said that he and other town residents will fight the proposed demolition.

"Everybody [in town] knows it's historic, and a number of residents actually attended school there," Leonnig said. "It may be a problematic building, but there's a wealth of sympathy in the town to try to preserve it in some fashion."

Johnson said her agency will also seek public comment on the issue.

"What our intent was before we discovered [the site] was a historic resource was . . . to take the old building down, design the new structure and then go through the community outreach process," Johnson said. "As it is now, we'll probably engage the public early on through the Historic Preservation Commission review."

Sonnett, who was scheduled to be briefed on the issue Tuesday, said he wants to make sure the town's best interests are at heart.

"We're anxious to see that the right thing is done here, because it's been noted in many planning documents that [the old school building] is an important visual in the town," he said. "If, in fact, [OCS has] done their homework, and it's really cost-prohibitive to rehab the building for readaptive use, then it makes sense from the taxpayers' perspective."