



A Historic Properties Reuse Study of the Kasson Public School

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20 October 2009

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past six months, the five members of the Kasson Public School reuse team have been involved in an intensive effort to gather, analyze and synthesize a mountain of information that will enable us to make a reality-based recommendation about the future of the 1918 building. Our information has come from two main sources—the building itself; and the residents of Kasson and the surrounding area. Well aware of the prolonged and often difficult debate that has raged over the fate of this property since it was vacated in 2005, the team sought to develop and apply a process that was systematic, thorough, inclusive, transparent, impartial, and practical.

The team began its investigations by taking a hard look at the building itself. The two architects and team leader spent one entire day in (and on) the building, examining its structure, exterior envelope, site conditions, spatial characteristics, mechanical systems, materials, and ornamental features. The building has a few problems, as do all buildings, old or new--but the building is eminently reusable. It is an asset whose quality of design and construction could not easily be duplicated in Kasson or anywhere else today, and it should not be discarded

As the team made its way through the weeks of interviews, phone conversations, e-mail exchanges, and meetings that went into the production of this report, it soon became evident that the possibilities for the future of this longstanding local landmark had been reduced to just two: preserve it or tear it down. This reduction of what should be a vast spectrum of possibilities for a building of this quality and character to merely black or white, seems attributable more to the polarization, posturing, and hard feelings that inevitably arise from lengthy conflict than from any innate attributes of the building, the community, or the economy.

Over the past months, the team has listened to the community's concerns, has taken careful note of the community's expressed needs, values and desires. Team members have considered a variety of new uses for the building and site, have discussed a range of alternatives ranging from "do nothing" to demolition, and have sought to identify some middle ground that would enable the people of Kasson to utilize an existing asset and work together to accomplish a common goal.

Summary of Findings

As the team went over the list of ideas provided by Kasson-area residents, it immediately became apparent that there was very little local interest in utilizing the school building or site for an income-generating function. The list of ideas fell squarely into the realm of public use. Consequently, as team members began to formulate their recommendations, they began with the assumption that whatever happened to the school/site, projects that would fulfill a generally agreed-upon public purpose would have the greatest potential for success.

The one exception to the public reuse option came in the area of housing. Although there are numerous obstacles to such a reuse, including current market conditions, city zoning

requirements, the city's interest in retaining ownership and control of the school site, and neighborhood concerns about the compatibility certain types of housing with surrounding residential areas, several housing scenarios are explored in this report.

It also became evident that, for a project at the site to succeed, it would have to do more than simply preserve a historic building. In looking back through the information gathered over the past few months, the team also began to identify goals that had repeatedly been articulated by individuals, officials, and in published materials such as the city's comprehensive plan, in an effort to find a creative use/reuse of the site/building that would reflect community values and satisfy stated goals, including:

- The city's official commitment to historic preservation.
- A strongly expressed interest in maintaining the 1918 School site for public use, and a desire to control development at that location.
- A desire to enhance the vitality of the community's central business district by maintaining a critical mass of important commercial and civic functions near Main Street.
- A general awareness of the need to expand and improve the public library, as well as widespread support for the idea.
- A clearly articulated interest in creating a community center for the citizens of Kasson, and perhaps the surrounding area.
- A stated commitment to sustainability.

An ideal reuse of the school/site should keep the site in public hands, be politically viable, be attainable within a reasonable window of time, and be possible to complete in a fiscally responsible manner. It should also contribute to the vitality of the community's traditional downtown, help to provide the community with a much-needed new library space, provide a venue for public gatherings of all sorts, and be compatible with the surrounding neighborhood.

Recommendation

In formulating its recommendation for the Kasson School building, the reuse team assigned priorities to options that would:

- Keep the largest number of options open.
- Reflect community values.
- Enable the community to achieve as many of its stated goals as possible.
- Fill unmet needs that have been identified and supported by a large segment of the public.
- Be economically or socially viable. An economically viable project is defined as one that would generate sufficient revenue to be self-sustaining. A socially viable project is one that serves a generally acknowledged public need, and that citizens would be willing to subsidize through the tax structure.

The reuse team recommends that the community of Kasson should accept the challenge of rehabilitating the 1918 Kasson Public School Building as a multi-use library/community center/city hall.

Implementation

-Mothball the building. The city of Kasson should take immediate steps to halt further deterioration of the 1918 building by mothballing the building as outlined later in the report.

-Appoint a citizen task force to oversee a systematic planning effort for rehabilitating the former Kasson Public School as a multi-use library/community center/city hall. Because the school building and site are city-owned property, the task force should be comprised entirely of individuals residing and voting in the city of Kasson. The task force should have the authority to direct and draw upon the expertise of appropriate city staff and outside experts. The task force should be provided with a sufficient budget to complete its work.

-Undertake a systematic, thorough, and inclusive planning effort for the project. Under the leadership of the local task force, and in consultation with appropriate outside professionals the community should develop a comprehensive architectural program for a multi-use library/community center. The planning process should be designed specifically to include representatives from the library board, the city council, and other individuals and groups with a direct stake in the planning process.

-Examine the potential for both a phased and total rehabilitation of the school building. As noted earlier, a phased rehabilitation would offer the potential advantage of allowing the community to meet its objectives of improving its public library facilities and creating a community center in a shorter period of time and at lower cost than either a full rehabilitation of the school building, or construction of an entirely new facility.

-Investigate ways to complete the rehabilitation either as a publicly financed project or as a public-private development partnership. The task force, with the help of city staff and outside experts should fully investigate the range of incentives, grants, and other financial instruments that could be employed to reduce the cost of completing a rehabilitation of the school building.

-Assemble a package of local incentives that could be offered to a private developer. Working with the city council, the Kasson EDA, Dodge County, and other staff and officials, the task force should assemble a package of incentives that could be offered to a private developer as part of a public-private development plan. A public/private option could move the project timetable ahead, would allow the city to retain control of the site, and could enable the community to complete the project at a lower cost than it could with public financing. The task force should also reopen discussion of forging a joint-powers agreement with surrounding communities to complete a community center project.

-Market the building to potential development partners. Once the planning is in place, and a package of incentives has been assembled, the community can determine whether or not it makes sense to pursue the option of completing the rehabilitation as part

of a public/private collaboration. If so, the task force should actively market the project to developers.

-Allow time for investigation. At this point, efforts to create a community center appear to be at a standstill. City officials have indicated that, given current economic conditions and competing capital improvement priorities, completion of any sort of new library facility is at least five years away. With that horizon in mind, the task force should be give ample time to complete its work in a thorough, systematic, and transparent way without fear that the building will be demolished in the interim.

-Engage and educate the public about the potential for rehabilitating the school for a new public purpose. The task force should make a concerted effort to provide information about the potential services that could be provided in a rehabilitated school building. The group should provide information about the actual physical condition of the building and how problems would be solved. The task force should outline and publicize steps and a timeline for the project. The group should clearly define the amount of taxation, if any, that a property owner would incur if the project were to move forward.

-Allow the public to weigh in. Regardless of whether the project is completed as a public effort or as a public-private collaboration, the citizens of Kasson should be given an opportunity to participate in the planning process, should be given accurate and plentiful information about facilities, financing, and timing, and then should be given an opportunity to decide how to proceed.

CHRONOLOGY

1865 The city of Kasson is platted by Jabez Hyde Kasson and two others following completion of the new Winona and St. Peter Railroad. At about this time a log structure was built along Mantorville Avenue to serve as a schoolhouse.

1860s A brick, two-story school building is erected near the intersection of present-day First Street Northwest and Third Avenue Northwest.

1870 (February) The village of Kasson is incorporated.

1870s The rapidly growing city of Kasson erects new brick school on the block bounded by present-day Third and Fourth Avenues Northwest; and by First and Second Streets Northwest (site of the building under study).

1892 The school building is remodeled after sustaining serious damage in a fire.

1895 The school building is expanded by construction of a second story and a belfry. A stone water tower is erected on the northwest corner of the school property and the school is given free use of water.

1916 Inspectors from the Minnesota Department of Education visit Kasson, and recommend construction of a new facility.

1917 (June) The school building is destroyed by fire. Within two weeks of the fire, Owatonna architect Nels Jacobson, Jr. is retained to design a new school building.

1918 (March) Minneapolis contractors Madson and Peterson begin construction of the new school building.

1954 The Kasson and Mantorville schools form a consolidated district.

1958 Following completion of the new Kasson-Mantorville High School between the two communities, the 1918 Kasson building is put into service as an elementary school.

1996 Following completion of a new Kasson-Mantorville Elementary School adjacent to the High School, the 1918 Kasson building becomes a Learning Center, providing space for community education, early childhood programs, an alternative school, and school district offices.

2005 The Kasson-Mantorville Consolidated School District vacates the 1918 building. (March) The city of Kasson retains Kane and Johnson Architects of Rochester to conduct a space needs study for a variety of city functions including a fire station, city hall and library. The cost of these three projects was estimated to be approximately \$5.5 million, which would be financed with general obligation bonds. The city's financial consultant estimated that if 60 new homes were constructed each year, and if the city's operating

costs increased no more than 7% per year, bond payments could be made without requiring increases in local property taxes. (City website)

2006 The city of Kasson acquires the 1918 school building and site from the consolidated school district, with the expressed goal of retaining the property for a library, city hall, or another public use. (November) In preparation for a bond referendum on the concept, the city holds a series of public meetings and building tours for local residents. In November, Kasson citizens vote on proposal to allow the city to issue \$3.9 million in general obligation bonds to fund rehabilitation of the 1918 school building for use as a city hall, library, or other public purposes. The bond referendum is defeated by a vote of 1026 to 894. A few weeks after the vote, the Kasson city council votes to approve demolition of the school building. (November) Local preservationists begin meeting to discuss the school's future.

2007 (January) Preservationists form the Kasson Alliance for Restoration (KARE) in an effort to preserve and reuse the 1918 school building. (May) KARE files suit in Dodge County District Court to enjoin demolition of the 1918 building under the Minnesota Environmental Rights Act. A temporary injunction is granted on 7 June 2007. The Kasson School is included on the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota's annual listing of the state's most endangered historic properties. (December) The Kasson Public School is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

2008 (August) KARE and the city of Kasson agree to settle the lawsuit. Terms of the settlement include an agreement for the two parties to share the costs of conducting a Historic Properties Reuse Study for the 1918 building.

2009 (March-October) The city of Kasson, the Kasson Alliance for Restoration (KARE) and the School Reuse Action Committee sponsor and administer a Historic Properties Reuse Study of the Kasson Public School.

INTRODUCTION

For residents of many communities, there is perhaps no building that is more familiar than their public school. The school building is a place where generations of young scholars learn to read and write; where they develop interests that lead to their life's work; and where they make enduring friendships. In many communities, the public school is also a focal point for civic, social, cultural, and athletic events.

The school building provides tangible evidence of a community's willingness to invest in its future. In many places, schools are among the few structures to be designed by architects. They are built of the finest materials and equipped with amenities such as gymnasiums, auditoriums, and shops that are not duplicated elsewhere. They are well-maintained, and regularly updated to meet changing life-safety, accessibility, and environmental standards.

These characteristics make school buildings prime candidates for historic designation--and for rehabilitation. It is not surprising, then, that when district consolidation, new theories of school design, or state funding formulas cause a historic school building to be closed, the event is likely to elicit a strong reaction from local residents.

This was the case in Kasson, a community of 5,200 people located about fifteen miles west of Rochester. Designed by Owatonna architect, Nels Jacobson, Jr. and built in 1918-1919, the Kasson building was one of the first schools in the state to provide a gymnasium for its students. It also included a large assembly room, space for agricultural and domestic science departments, and specially equipped rooms for chemistry and physics classes. For nearly ninety years, the Kasson Public School played a central role in the life of the community, serving as Kasson's only school building until the 1950s, when the high-school merged with nearby Mantorville; serving as an elementary school for more than four decades after that; and finally housing a variety of educational and administrative functions. Since the building's closure in 2005, the community has been engaged in a challenging—and sometimes contentious—debate about the building's future.

Background

The fate of the school building first emerged as an issue in 2005 when the Kasson-Mantorville School District moved the few programs remaining in the building to the district's expansive campus north of town. Seeing an opportunity to meet its needs for additional space, and also to achieve a stated objective of “develop[ing] or redevelop[ing] the elementary school site to benefit the community and enhance the surrounding neighborhood if [the school district] discontinue[d] use for educational purposes,” the city retained Kane and Johnson Architects of Rochester to complete a Space Needs Study which, among other things, investigated the potential for reusing the school building or site to help meet the city's long and short term facilities needs. As part of this study, Kane and Johnson prepared concept drawings and rough cost estimates showing how the 1918 school building could be converted into a multi-use public building housing city offices, the public library, and space for community gatherings. The estimated cost of the project was \$3.9 million. With this information in hand, the city acquired the 1918

building and site from the school district, forgiving approximately \$350,000 worth of assessments for infrastructure improvements at the school campus in exchange for the property. That transaction was completed in 2006.¹

In November 2006, the Kane and Johnson concept plan was submitted to local citizens in the form of a referendum. Voters were asked to decide if the city of Kasson should “be authorized to issue its general obligation bonds in an amount not to exceed \$3,900,000 to defray the expense of the renovation, expansion and equipping of the former elementary school for city hall, library, or other governmental purposes.” The referendum failed by a vote of 894 to 1,026. A few weeks later the Kasson city council voted to demolish the building.

After lobbying unsuccessfully for the city council to reverse its decision, a group of preservation advocates from Kasson and the surrounding area formed the Kasson Alliance for Restoration (KARE) a new non-profit organization dedicated to finding a way to rehabilitate, rather than demolish the building. The group succeeded in having the school listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and sued the city under provisions of the Minnesota Environmental Rights Act in an effort to halt the demolition. The lawsuit was filed in May of 2007, and the courts issued a temporary injunction prohibiting demolition in June. More than a year of litigation followed.

Purpose of the Reuse Study

In an effort to settle the lawsuit out of court and resolve the school issue, the city of Kasson and KARE, agreed in 2008 to co-sponsor a Historic Properties Reuse Study of the Kasson School. A request for proposals (RFP) for the project was issued in December 2008, and a contract for the project was awarded to a team assembled by John Lauber and Company of Minneapolis in the spring of 2009. According to the RFP, the purpose of the study was “to define and evaluate reuse options regarding the 1918-era Kasson Elementary School and/or its site.” The reuse team’s findings are articulated in this report.

Acknowledgements

The Historic Properties Reuse Study of the Kasson School was jointly sponsored and funded primarily by the City of Kasson and the Kasson Alliance for Restoration (KARE). The project was completed in collaboration with the School Reuse Action Committee (SCHRAC), a nineteen-member advisory committee of area citizens, officials, and technical experts. The Kasson School Reuse Study project was also funded in part by a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota.

¹ “Comprehensive Plan for Kasson, Minnesota, Implemented 7/96; Revised 2/02: Tree City USA,” 32; also see David I. Kane and Kevin T. Blondo, “City of Kasson Space Needs Study,” Rochester, MN: Kane and Johnson Architects, Inc. for the City of Kasson Building Committee, 3 March 2005.

The Reuse Team

The team assembled for the Kasson School Reuse Study has amassed extensive experience in the assessment, rehabilitation, and adaptive reuse of historic buildings. Team members have also demonstrated their collective commitment to community-driven, process-oriented planning through participation in more than two dozen historic properties reuse studies, nearly twenty Minnesota Design Team visits, and design charrettes. Members include:

John Lauber

Minneapolis-based preservation planner John Lauber served as principal investigator for the Kasson School project. Lauber earned his M.A. degree in Historic Preservation from Cornell University, and has more than nineteen years of varied experience in the field. He has participated in more than twenty reuse studies. He meets the Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualification Standards for History and Architectural History.

Steve Edwins, AIA

A principal in SMSQ Architects, Northfield, Steve earned his M.Arch. Degree from Yale University. He has more than thirty years experience with the design and rehabilitation of religious, public and institutional buildings. Steve also has extensive knowledge of and dedication to the principles of energy-efficient design. Steve meets the Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualification Standards as a Historical Architect.

Steve Wilmot

After earning his M.Arch Degree at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Steve worked in Chicago before joining the staff of SMSQ in 2000. His experience includes condition assessments, master plans, and rehabilitation projects of historic buildings, as well as a recent reuse study for the Northfield Middle School. He meets the Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualification Standards as a Historical Architect.

Peter Musty

Since earning his B.Arch. Degree from Notre Dame University, Peter has established a reputation as an expert in facilitation, collaborative planning, and urban design. He has participated in more than forty public design workshops throughout the country, and has pioneered the use of the internet as a tool for participatory planning. He served as webmaster, facilitator and urban designer for the Kasson project.

Tom Nordyke

After earning his B.A. Degree from the University of Minnesota, Tom began his professional career as Manager of Facilities for the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management. Since then he has established himself as an expert in public policy and real estate development. He spent sixteen years as Vice-President of Properties for Artspace Projects, a non-profit developer from Minneapolis; has worked as an independent development consultant; and recently accepted a position with Aeon, a non-profit housing developer from Minneapolis. Tom served as the development and finance consultant for the Kasson study.

Approach

The Kasson school reuse team sought to design a study process that was thoughtful, thorough, unbiased, inclusive, and transparent, with an emphasis on discovering a practical solution to the school issue. Recognizing the need to maximize opportunities for public involvement throughout the study, the team created a project website [www.kassonschoolreuse.net] early in the process. The website provided project background, outlined the study process, offered progress reports, and provided a mechanism for visitors to send comments to the team via e-mail. Other steps in the process included:²

Pre-Contract Site Visit

On 23 February, 2009, principal investigator John Lauber traveled to Kasson to conduct a preliminary inspection of the school. During this visit he took photographs of interior and exterior features as a means of orienting the reuse team to the building and site.

Background research

The study team formally began its work in March 2009. The team collected and reviewed information about the history and character of the community. The group studied architectural drawings, abatement reports, facilities assessments and other materials relating specifically to the condition and layout of the school building. Team members reviewed the legal settlement agreement, National Register of Historic Places documentation, and other materials relating to the debate over the fate of the building.

Building Assessment

On 20 April principal investigator John Lauber and historical architects Steve Edwins and Steve Wilmot conducted a thorough field investigation of the building. With the aid of flashlights, ladders, and a hydraulic lift truck provided by Kasson's electric utility, team members were able to inspect all of the property's interior and exterior spaces, including roof surfaces, attic spaces, and the boiler room area in addition to the classrooms, gymnasium, kitchen/lunch room, restrooms and locker rooms. Team members documented existing conditions with photographs, field notes, and measurements.

Interviews and Public Meetings

The entire team returned to Kasson on 10-12 June to conduct three days of intensive information gathering. The team participated in a guided tour of the community, met with staff and officials from the city, attended a library board meeting, and interviewed more than forty area business owners, political leaders, and neighborhood residents as well as real estate, development and financial professionals. On Thursday 11 June, the team led a community workshop attended by nearly fifty people. While in the area, team members also toured the Kasson and Dodge Center public libraries, and visited vacant or partially utilized schools in Mantorville, Dodge Center, Byron, and West Concord. The team concluded each day with a briefing session for members of the School Reuse Action Committee (SCHRAC).

² As of 19 October, 2009, the project website had recorded 3776 visitors.

Identifying and Analyzing Issues

Before leaving Kasson, the team gathered for a work session to outline a preliminary list of issues that could affect the future of the school. The team also reviewed potential school reuse scenarios suggested by interviewees and workshop attendees.

Working Sessions

After leaving Kasson team members worked individually and as a group to explore issues in depth. The group developed a list of possibilities for dealing with the building and/or site, and formulated a recommended course of action. Members prepared conceptual drawings, cost estimates and alternatives for redeveloping and financing reuse of the building and site.

Draft Report

Results of the working sessions were compiled into a draft report, which was submitted to study sponsors on 21 September 2009, and presented to stakeholders at a meeting of the Kasson City Council on 23 September. Excerpts from the draft were posted on the project website, and copies were circulated to project sponsors and other interested parties for review.

Final Report

Review comments were received from the city on 5 October, from SCHRAC on 8 October, and from KARE on 10 October. Comments have been addressed in this report.

THE PHYSICAL PLANT

A careful inventory and assessment of the physical characteristics and condition of the subject property is an important first step in any reuse study. A building that is structurally unsound, severely deteriorated, filled with hazardous materials, or hard to adapt for new uses may be a poor candidate for reuse.

Reuse teams typically begin the process of evaluating the building by reviewing architectural drawings, maintenance records, hazardous materials surveys and other documents created during the structure's lifetime. In the case of the Kasson School, the original architect's drawings and many of the building's maintenance records were not available. The team did have access to floor plans created as part of an electrical and mechanical retrofit program in 1988, to a hazardous materials survey, and to sketch plans prepared as part of a space needs study completed in 2005.

Reuse teams also complete a careful inspection of the building, examining interior and exterior spaces, identifying character-defining features, assessing the condition and adaptability of the property's structural matrix, evaluating the condition of mechanical, electrical, plumbing and life safety systems, noting the location and causes of damage, and recording all of this information with photographs, measured drawings, and field notes. The Kasson team completed a day long inspection of the 1918 building on 20 April 2009. A full record of that inspection is included in Appendix A of this report. A summary of major findings follows.

Building Description and Condition

The Kasson School was designed with three distinct two-story blocks, joined together by one-story connecting links. The central pavilion houses the main entrance, and contains a lunchroom, restrooms, and a second floor gymnasium/auditorium. The wings flanking the central pavilion contain classroom spaces. The connecting links serve as a thoroughfare for a main corridor that runs north-south through the entire building. The building encompasses a total of approximately 33,000 square feet.

Naturally lighted stairwells at the north and south ends also contain doorways that exit directly to the outside. The building's central pavilion has a partial basement for heating equipment, with tunnels extending beneath and connecting the three main sections. The tunnels are connected to a system of vertical shafts or chases that were integral components of the original ventilation system.

With its tile roof, overhanging bracketed eaves, solid massing, and tripartite arrangement, the 1918 School was designed on the model of a Renaissance villa—a style that was popular for buildings of civic importance during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The main entrance in the central pavilion features a series of low, wide stairs leading to three sets of double doors set into arched openings and surrounded by classical columns supporting a full entablature. The design clearly identifies the main entrance,

and suggests that the building serves an important civic function. This monumentality is amplified by the school's prominent location on high ground near Main Street.

As a model of new thinking for schools at the time, the Kasson building was perhaps the first public school in Minnesota to display this tripartite arrangement. After successfully testing this prototype in Kasson, the architect Nels Jacobson, Jr. employed a similar concept for the much larger Owatonna High School in 1921. The idea set a standard that was subsequently adopted for the design of many schools and other public buildings throughout the state.

The building remains relatively intact and is generally in very good condition, with no apparent structural problems. The roof functions well and exterior walls are in good condition in most places, although there is some minor water damage beneath rain leaders and in areas of negative surface drainage at the southwest corner of the north wing. The original multi-paned double hung sash have been replaced with insulated metal sliding units. Windows are generally in good condition, although some glass has been broken. Transom panels contain asbestos.

Load-bearing interior walls appear to be structurally sound. Non-load-bearing interior walls include original partitions built of clay tile and gypsum block covered with plaster; more recent partitions are of wood-frame construction sheathed with drywall. Partition walls could be removed without compromising the structure. Floors are of concrete and clay tile construction surfaced with maple strips, composition tile, and ceramic tile. Classroom floors have been carpeted, and some of the original wood flooring has sustained water damage. The original ceiling surfaces were plastered and some areas are in need of repair. Framing and trim remain in place for original skylights above the gymnasium and an upper level assembly room in the north wing. A suspended ceiling system installed ca. the early 1970s is damaged in areas, but could be easily repaired. Much of the original wood trim and cabinetry remains in place throughout the building, although some trim has been removed, and built in cabinets and doors have been damaged or replaced.

Mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and life safety systems are functional, but all are in need of upgrades to meet current building codes. The building is fully accessible on the first level, but none of the upper level spaces meet current accessibility requirements.

The Site

The Kasson School occupies an entire city block in the historic core of the community. The school grounds are located on a knoll just north of Main Street, bounded by Third and Fourth Avenues; and First and Second Streets northwest. The building is surrounded on three sides by grassy lawns with a number of mature trees. The area behind and to the west of the building is paved with asphalt, with a small sandy area that once provided space for playground equipment. There is a limited amount of on-street parking on each

side, with at-grade access to the building on the north. The community's historic stone water tower rises from the northwest corner.

The school property is located within easy walking distance of Kasson's central business district. Nearby amenities include Erdman's Supermarket, a Mayo Family Clinic, a pharmacy, dentists' offices, and a movie theater, as well as an assortment of other retail and service businesses.

The site has been used for public purposes since the 1870s, when Kasson's second permanent public school building was erected on the property. The present building is the second school to occupy the space. The property has, according to one official, "functioned as a town square" for nearly 140 years.

Despite its prominent location on the highest point in town, rumors persist that the school sits atop a network of underground springs. The presence of water in the basement-level boiler room, and the fact that most of the building sits at grade lend some credence to these rumors. Local residents recall that the southwest corner of the block was leveled with fill during the post World-War II years to create a level parking area on the west side of the building. Geological investigations be useful to determine the nature and magnitude of groundwater issues.

At present the pavement slopes toward the building in the north courtyard area, diverting runoff from the roof toward the boiler room, and contributing to problems of water infiltration in that area.

Assets and Liabilities for Reuse

Assets for a potential reuse of the 1918 School building include:

- Location and site.
- The building's civic character and status as a local landmark.
- The building's high degree of structural and architectural integrity.
- The school's high quality of construction, good physical condition, and aesthetically-pleasing features.
- The building's tripartite arrangement lends itself to multiple or phased reuses.
- Interior spaces are large, with high ceilings, and large windows.
- The building represents a significant amount of embodied energy. It could be made more energy efficient through the installation of new windows and additional insulation, and could make use of natural lighting and ventilation, zoned heating and cooling systems and other sustainability strategies.
- The school's structural systems and layout are easily adaptable for new functions.
- The building's high quality of construction and materials would be difficult and expensive to replicate. The life cycle of any replacement structure is likely to be significantly shorter than that of the existing building, and should be considered as part of any plans to demolish and replace the 1918 building.

Liabilities for a potential reuse of the building include:

- Many local residents have not been in the building for several years and are unfamiliar with its current condition. Many individuals may assume either that the building is too damaged to repair, or that the cost of rehabilitation would greatly exceed the cost of new construction.
- Water infiltration into the boiler room area and parts of the north wing has damaged interior plaster and wood strip flooring. Runoff from the roof and negative surface drainage has caused some damage to exterior walls. Repairs to these areas could be costly.
- The site offers a limited amount of space for parking, and limited access to the building from the existing parking area on the west side. These concerns could be addressed in part through the creation of a new entrance on the west side.
- None of the building's second-floor spaces currently meet accessibility standards for people with disabilities.
- Existing fire escapes in the north and south wings might not meet egress requirements.
- The school's exterior walls consist of a structural tile core faced with brick on the exterior and plaster on the interior, making it difficult to fully insulate the building.
- The individual sections of the building enclose relatively small floor plates, which may prove insufficient for some uses.

ISSUES ANALYSIS

Preservation Issues

Kasson is endowed with a large assortment of historic properties, including WPA–built recreational facilities in North Park; the community’s second-oldest school building; and an assortment of historic homes dating from the latter third of the nineteenth century. Five properties, including the former Kasson Municipal Building (Purcell and Elmslie, 1922); the Eureka Hotel (1894); the Jacob and Martha Leuthhold Residence (Kees and Coburn, 1905) and the city’s iconic stone water tower (1895); are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Kasson Public School was added to the Register in 2007. The building’s National Register status qualifies it for a number of grant and incentive programs, and also imposes some constraints on the city’s ability to demolish the building.

The community exhibits some appreciation for these resources. The stone water tower, for example, is featured on the city’s letterhead. Kasson’s comprehensive plan, first implemented in 1996, and revised in 2002, includes a general recommendation for the city to “preserve the community’s heritage through the preservation of historic and architecturally significant structures.”³

The official city’s record of implementing the preservation component of the comprehensive plan seems somewhat contradictory. To date, the community has not instituted a formal legal infrastructure that would support preservation (passing a historic preservation ordinance, establishing a heritage preservation commission, etc.). Opportunities for the city to become involved in preservation, including a movement to restore the water tower in the late 1990s, efforts to retain WPA features in North Park, and the current desire of some residents to rehabilitate the 1918 school building, have met with active resistance from city officials and staff.

The Kasson Alliance for Restoration (KARE), a non-profit preservation advocacy group was established in 2007 as an outgrowth of the effort to preserve the 1918 school building. The group is well organized, includes large constituency from Kasson and the surrounding area, as well as a number of former Kasson residents, and has expanded beyond its original vision to foster stewardship of other local historic resources.

City Issues

The city’s 1996/2002 Comprehensive Plan outlined a number of deficiencies in city-owned facilities. Among other issues, the Plan noted that the city needed to anticipate a need for an enlarged city council chamber that could accommodate large community meetings; that it should consider creation of small meeting rooms needed by organizations throughout the community, and that there was a need for expanded office space for city staff.

³ “Comprehensive Plan,” 32.

In an effort to address these needs, the city retained Kane and Johnson Architects of Rochester to conduct a Space Needs Study for the City. Their report, issued in 2005, delineated square footage requirements for a variety of city functions and facilities. As part of this study, Kane and Johnson created the schematic design for combining city hall, library, and community center functions in a rehabilitated Kasson Public School Building. In their report, Kane and Johnson noted that

The reuse of the old elementary school for city hall and library use would serve to preserve and restore a major piece of Kasson history! The location of the building is ideal for city hall as well as library use and off-street parking is available. The exterior of the building is in good shape considering its age and with minor work could be restored. The interior of the building would require major renovation but we anticipate that this could be more cost effective than construction of a new building on a new site.⁴

The Kane-Johnson report estimated the cost of rehabilitating the 32,000 square-foot 1918 School for public purposes to be \$3,295,936 versus \$3,399,000 to demolish the school and replace it with a new 22,000 square foot building. Neither estimate included the costs of hazardous materials abatement, architectural and engineering fees, or fixtures and furnishings. A note in the report also stated that the cost estimate for new construction “is based on [a] 4 year old estimate and has not been updated to reflect current construction costs. These costs are likely 30% higher at this time.” Using that multiplier, the estimated cost of new construction would be \$4,418,700, not including abatement and fees. This would have placed the estimated cost of new construction \$1,122,764 higher than the cost of rehabilitation.⁵

The present city hall also houses the police department. It is a small building, enclosing just over 6,000 square feet, including the basement and garage. The city has outgrown the space, and has expressed a continued willingness to move into expanded quarters if they become available.

City officials and staff have indicated that the 1918 school was obtained for the explicit purpose of using the property—with or without the school building—for a new library. Officials also expressed a strong desire to retain control of the site, because it has, in the words of one representative “served as a town square” for well over a century.

KARE Issues

The Kasson Alliance for Restoration (KARE) is a non-profit preservation advocacy group that was established in 2007 as an outgrowth of the effort to preserve the 1918 school building. The group is well organized, includes a large constituency from both Kasson and the surrounding area, and has expanded beyond its original vision to foster stewardship of other local historic resources.

⁴ “Space Needs,” n.p.

⁵ Ibid.

Established following the Kasson city council's November 2006 vote to demolish the school building, KARE successfully filed in Dodge County District Court for an injunction that temporarily prohibited demolition of the Kasson Public School. The organization also succeeded in having the school listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.

The organization's legal actions, vocal and public opposition to the city's handling of the school issue and, some would say, heavy-handed advocacy, have angered some local residents and city representatives. Some residents felt that KARE drew many members from outside Kasson, that the organization was responsible for the prolonged and rancorous debate over the future of the building, and complained that KARE had insisted on preserving the school, but had been unable or unwilling to come up with a plan to use it or a way to pay for it

Political Issues

The city council's 2006 decision to demolish the 1918 school building was at variance with findings of a city-financed Space Needs Study completed the previous year. The decision came just three weeks after a referendum in which voters were asked to approve an expenditure of nearly \$4 million to rehabilitate the building.

Court action resulting in an injunction against demolition, the listing of the school building on the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota's 2007 list of the state's most endangered historic properties, and a steady stream of press releases regarding the effort to preserve the building have kept the deliberations over the fate of the building in the public eye.

The prolonged and often rancorous wrangling over the future of the Kasson Public School building has raised the profile of the debate. As one interviewee described it, "public posturing" by those on both sides of the issue has made it difficult to have an open dialogue about the future of the building.

Changes in the roster of elected officials since 2006 may have changed the mood at city hall, and made city representatives more receptive to compromise. The city's willingness to negotiate a settlement for the KARE-initiated lawsuit may be a promising sign.

Community Issues

Kasson is the largest community in Dodge County, and functions as an important commercial center for the surrounding area, with a branch of the Mayo Clinic, a pharmacy, and the county's only substantial grocery store.

Located at the intersection of State Highway 57 and US Highway 14, Kasson is within easy commuting distance of both Rochester and Owatonna. Some years ago Highway 14 was realigned to a bypass south of town and the stretch between Kasson and Rochester was widened from two to four lanes. This change helped alter the character of Kasson from a typical small town to more of a bedroom community, with some 70% of local residents commuting to work in Rochester or other nearby communities.

This transformation has brought many new residents to Kasson. Between 1990 and 2007, the population of the community increased from 3,514 to 5,520. In order to accommodate this influx of newcomers, the city has repeatedly extended its boundaries, annexing an estimated 300 acres during this time. Census figures indicate that 475 new housing units were erected in the decade between 1990 and 2000, and the building boom continued virtually unabated until quelled by the economic downturn that began in 2007. As a result of this activity, the historic core of the community is surrounded by large areas of suburban-style residential development, with much of the new construction taking place to the north and west of the original town site. The large population of newcomers did not attend school in the building, many have never been inside, and most have little sentimental attachment to it.

Neighborhood Issues

The Kasson Public School is situated in a predominantly residential neighborhood, with homes facing it on all four sides. According to the city's official zoning map the property is zoned R-C (Residential-Commercial Mixed Use District), which reflects the city's intention to ensure uses that are compatible with residential areas. The zoning code places conditions on commercial, office, institutional, and multi-family residential uses and prohibits industrial uses altogether. The school has been a good neighbor for more than a century.

Since the building was vacated in 2005, however, some neighbors have expressed concerns that the empty building is in danger of becoming an eyesore. The property has been minimally maintained, has been invaded on occasion by vandals, and is used only for law enforcement training by police officers wielding paintball guns and pistols. The building is still handsome, but is showing some signs of neglect, displaying bare plywood window infill on the main level and open and broken windows on the upper levels.

Some local residents have expressed concern about potential reuses such as low-income housing that could change the character of a comfortable neighborhood; and about uses that would generate traffic or large amounts of on-street parking.

Economic Development/Downtown Issues

Like many smaller communities, Kasson is concerned about the well-being of its traditional Main Street. The central business district continues to host a number of important anchors –a movie theater, a branch of the Mayo Clinic, a pharmacy, and the Erdman's supermarket, which draws customers from a wide area. But a number of long established local businesses-such as the venerable Leuthold clothing store have gone out of business in recent years, and a number of downtown buildings are underutilized, for sale, or for rent.

In its 1996/2002 Comprehensive Plan, the city of Kasson outlined a number of goals for economic development, specifying among other things, that the city should seek to “maintain and enhance the central business district as the primary location for commercial and retail services,” that the community should make an effort to “retain the post office in the central business district,” and noting that “the location of a new public

library should be in an area that complements the central business district in order to support the stability of that area and to offer the greatest convenience to patrons.”⁶

Much of the responsibility for maintaining the vitality of Main Street seems to have devolved to the city’s Economic Development Authority, which has been equipped with a modest assortment of incentives, including tax increment financing, low-interest loan programs, and expansion funds, to achieve this goal. The EDA was also given a responsibility to “utilize grants and assistance programs offered by private organizations to benefit the community.”⁷

Benefitting from a wave of new development in recent years, the EDA seems not to have utilized either its existing incentive programs to draw new businesses or development, nor to have found it necessary to pursue public money. These untapped sources of revenue could be useful and essential if the community determines to proceed with efforts to build a library/community center in the school building or elsewhere.

Economic Issues

The city of Kasson has been able to maintain a strong economy over the past several decades. A wave of new development over the past two decades has increased the community’s tax base. Public utilities provide a steady source of funding that have enabled some projects, such as the new Public Works facility to be completed with virtually no impact on property taxpayers. According to one staffer, the city has a \$10,000 bonding capacity, but currently has no outstanding general obligation bond debt.

City staff and elected officials are justifiably proud of the city’s financial condition, and consider fiscal responsibility to be one of their primary tasks. A reduction in development activity due to the recent economic downturn has taken some toll on the city’s budget, as have recent reductions in Local Government Aid from the state of Minnesota (\$150,000 this year, an estimated \$350,000 next year).

Area voters easily approved a levy referendum for construction of the recently completed Kasson-Mantorville Middle School, but may be reluctant to take on additional tax responsibility.

The concern most often stated by those who oppose reuse of the current school building is that they do not want their tax money used to finance the project. However, construction of any type of library or community center could require an infusion of tax funding, and the cost of rehabilitating the school could be considerably less. The Kane-Johnson space needs study, for example, demonstrated that the cost of reutilizing the existing building would be approximately \$500,000 less than the cost of erecting a new city hall/office building—and the existing building would yield approximately 8,000 more square feet than a new building. The cost of rehabilitation could be further reduced

⁶ “Comprehensive Plan,” 15, 30.

⁷ Ibid, 9.

through savings in demolition costs, and the application of funds generated from sale of existing library and city hall buildings.⁸

Concerns over taxes don't necessarily mean that a rehabilitation of the school building for a public purpose is out of the question, however. The community could also explore a public-private redevelopment partnership, or enter into a joint project co-funded by nearby communities. Under certain conditions, some individuals might even be willing to put their reluctance over tax increases aside. As a city representative stated it, "one nice thing about Kasson is that [residents] don't make decisions based on cost—if it's a good project, they'll give you the money."

School Issues

The Kasson Public School is well situated, is in generally good condition, encloses approximately 30,000 square feet of raw space, is arranged in three distinct sections, has relatively few interior bearing walls, and includes facilities such as a large gymnasium, that are unduplicated within the Kasson city limits. These characteristics would seem to make the building a good candidate for reuse. One factor working against redevelopment, however, is the availability of similar facilities in other nearby communities. A former school building in Dodge Center, for example, was acquired by a private investor, and is greatly underutilized. A former school building in Byron is used for community education, an alternative program, and other school-related purposes. A school building in West Concord has remained in use as a community center, with few changes to its physical plant. And the Kasson-Mantorville school district recently closed a building in Mantorville when the new K-M Middle School building was completed earlier this year. The Mantorville building is on the market for approximately \$500,000. Its proximity to the Dodge County Courthouse across the street makes it an ideal venue for much needed expansion of county offices.

The availability of a number of similar buildings in nearby communities works against the possibility of finding an income-producing tenant for the Kasson property and makes a public use option seem both more likely and more desirable.

Sustainability Issues

The original Request for Proposals for the Kasson School Reuse Study stipulated that the study should describe ways that a historic building could be "green or energy-efficient," discuss "the value of embodied energy," and describe how an adaptive reuse could integrate sustainable design elements.

New construction requires the manufacture and installation of new materials. The manufacturing process requires a considerable expenditure of new energy to convert resources such as wood, clay, stone, iron ore, and petroleum into lumber, concrete, steel, and roofing materials. By contrast, the rehabilitation of a building such as the 1918 School minimizes the need for new materials by recycling what is already there. By appropriating the "embodied energy" contained in the existing structure, reuse of the school building would enable the community to achieve its goals while greatly reducing

⁸ "Space Needs," n.p.

its consumption of new resources and energy. Reuse would also keep waste produced during a demolition of the building from being added to area landfills.

The 1918 building was designed long before mechanical ventilation and cooling systems and artificial lighting turned public buildings into hermetically sealed environments. Restoration of the original window openings, and installation of operable, thermally-efficient, historically appropriate new windows, would allow interior spaces to be ventilated during spring and fall seasons simply by opening windows, and would reduce the consumption of electricity by introducing natural light to augment artificial sources. Reopening the original skylights in the upper level assembly room in the north wing, and over the gymnasium would increase the amount of natural light available in those spaces.

The 1918 building's tripartite arrangement, with a mechanical room in the central pavilion linked by tunnels to the north and south wings, makes the school an ideal candidate for a zoned HVAC system. Installation of such a system would allow the temperature and ventilation in each section of the building to be controlled separately so that the system could be adjusted to meet demand. This type of system could reduce overall energy consumption, much in the same way that a programmable thermostat reduces energy consumption in a home. If the 1918 building were to be rehabilitated in phases, a zoned system would allow occupied spaces to be controlled for comfort, while mothballed or unoccupied spaces could be controlled to reduce deterioration or damage caused by poor ventilation or exposure to repeated freeze-thaw cycles.

The energy-efficiency of the 1918 building could also be improved through careful selection of the type of HVAC system to be utilized. A geothermal system, for example, would provide a high efficiency means of controlling the climate within the building. Some participants in the study have suggested that the high initial cost of such a system could be offset by creating a centralized heating/cooling district, with the costs of installing and operating the system's basic infrastructure shared among adjacent property owners.

Communications Issues

Key players on all sides of the school reuse issue (SCHRAC/City/Alliance) seem to have adopted highly polarized and entrenched positions. Relations between the factions are rancorous, and there is a high level of distrust on all sides. The fact that many individuals involved in the discussions are not voting residents of Kasson seems to have contributed to the poor communication. The city council's decision to demolish the school just a few weeks after asking residents to approve an expenditure of \$4 million to restore it, drove a wedge into negotiations, as did the legal proceedings initiated by KARE. This has translated to compartmentalized thinking that eliminates virtually any possibility of compromise or collaboration.

Communication problems are also evident within parts of city government. Elected officials and paid staff seemed often to present conflicting and contradictory evidence about specific issues, such as whether or not planning for a new library can proceed

without the city council formally designating a site; or whether there is money available for planning.

There also seems to be poor communication between city staff, officials, and members of citizen advisory groups. This is particularly evident in interactions between the city and the Library Board.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

During the information gathering phase of the study process, which included targeted interviews, the community workshop, responses to a survey posted on the website, and responses to paper surveys distributed at the city hall and public library, the reuse team asked area residents to identify unmet needs within the community that could be fulfilled either within the existing school building or on the existing school site. Responses included:

- Public library
- Library and related activities (space for programs, meetings, and events).
- Community center (auditorium, gymnasium, youth center).
- Space for conferences and meetings.
- Classroom space for community education.
- Space for homeschooler programming (recreation, program space)
- Housing, especially seniors.
- Space for city/county offices
- Police training facility
- Multiple uses with central pavilion reserved for public uses
- Telecommuting center
- Expansion space for Mayo Clinic
- Parking area for Mayo Clinic
- Housing for Mayo family medicine interns
- Daycare center
- Light industrial

The general consensus of respondents was that commercial, office, and light industrial uses would be incompatible with the residential neighborhood surrounding the school. There was also a sense that commercial uses would be unlikely to succeed given the high vacancy rate of existing buildings in the central business district. The ideas that received the most support from participants in the study process were:

- Public Library
- Community Center
- Housing

The team has examined each of these issues in the pages that follow.

Library Issues

The Kasson Public Library occupies a one-story, brick building located on First Street Northwest, just off Main Street. The 2,200 square-foot building is owned by the city and was formerly used by the Post Office. The property does not include a parking lot, and only minimal parking is available on adjacent streets.

Although the Kasson Public Library serves both local and regional constituents, the city provides the bulk of its funding. The budget is augmented by a small annual appropriation from Dodge County. The facility is administered by a volunteer advisory board, which is subject to Member of Southeastern Libraries Cooperative (SELCO).

The city's 1996/2002 Comprehensive Plan stated that "all interior spaces [in the existing library building] are congested and full to capacity," and also noted that the square footage of the building "is considered the absolute minimum size for a public library by the Office of Library Services and Development, State of Minnesota."⁹

The need for more and better library space was also universally acknowledged during the interviews and public meetings. Space is needed not only for stacks, media, computer stations, storage and work areas, but also for public programs, meetings, and other activities. The library board has identified an immediate need for 10,000 square feet with an anticipated need for 20,000 square feet. These amounts, however, include spaces that would be required for offices, storage, meeting rooms and program spaces. Public space, if shared, would not have to be included in overall square foot estimates (for example, if a portion of the school were to be rehabilitated for library use, the library itself might be able to get by with 5,000 to 10,000 square feet, and share other space with the city or other tenants).

Despite the obvious need for more and better space for the library, city staff indicated that competing priorities make realization of a new library facility at least five years off.

Efforts to provide adequate space for the library have been under way for nearly ten years. A plan to build a new one-story facility in the South Park area made significant headway a few years ago. Concerns over the costs of flood-plain mitigation and a potential need to acquire additional land, however, caused the project to fall through.

There appears to be a considerable level of disharmony between the Library Board and the City Council. Some Board members indicated that the planning for the 2006 referendum plan had proceeded without adequate input from the Board, and that the concept put forward for the vote had serious shortcomings as a result. City representatives suggested that the Board is uncomfortable with the council retaining control over library funding. Communication between the city and the Board appears to be poor.

Although the Board has articulated a number of goals and requirements for the design of a new facility (all functions on a single story, line of sight control over public spaces,

⁹ "Comprehensive Plan," 13-14.

need for programming space, etc.); and though the board has worked with a library design consultant in the past, there does not appear to have been any systematic effort to develop an architectural program for a new building. Although some individuals indicated that planning money might be in place and available from the city, there is disagreement about whether such money exists, and under what conditions it could be put to use.

The Board has expressed reservations about any reuse plan that would rehabilitate portions of the 1918 School building to provide space for an improved library facility. At a special meeting on 13 October, the Board stated its concern that there appeared to be “no alternative plan that includes other occupants of the elementary school,” and that “the library cannot financially afford to be the single occupant of the building.” The group also noted that a facility in the school would require custodial staff and a licensed boiler operator, noting that “the operating costs of the building alone would put the very existence of the Kasson Public Library in jeopardy.”¹⁰

Community Center Issues

During the interviews and community input workshop in June, a large number of local residents noted that Kasson is chronically short of indoor space for public gatherings such as meetings, cultural events, and recreational activities. Residents specifically mentioned their desire for an auditorium, a youth center, a gymnasium, a city council chamber and other conference-type spaces. Meeting rooms, gyms, and other facilities at the public school complex north of town are in constant use, and there is a need for additional space to accommodate existing activities.

The city’s 1996/2002 comprehensive plan recognized the need for such spaces, recommending “development of a multi-use Community Center through the collaboration of neighboring Cities, Townships, and Dodge County.”¹¹

In 1999, a citizen task force was convened to investigate the potential for creating a community center facility that would provide a healthy, safe and social environment” for the residents of Kasson and Mantorville. Initially conceived as an effort to provide a wholesome venue for teens, the project concept was eventually expanded to incorporate recreational and assembly spaces that would serve the needs of citizens of all ages. By 2002, the task force had outlined plans for a \$5.8 million dollar facility that would have been funded jointly by Kasson and Mantorville, and that would have been situated on 6-12 acres of donated land adjacent to the Kasson-Mantorville Junior and Senior High Schools.¹²

¹⁰ Kasson Public Library Board of Trustees, “Reuse Study Conceptual Plan Special Meeting Summary,” 13 October 2009.

¹¹ “Comprehensive Plan,” 33.

¹² Kasson-Mantorville Community Center Task Force, “Project Summary: Kasson-Mantorville Community Athletic Center,” 8 January 2002.

Although residents of both communities expressed their desire and support for such a facility, an effort to integrate a version of the project into the bond referendum for a proposed middle school “failed miserably” according to one interviewee.

The 1918 Kasson Public School building contains a large gymnasium, a lunchroom and kitchen area, two large upper-level assembly rooms, and a number of large classrooms that could be used for community gatherings without requiring extensive amounts of remodeling, new construction, or infrastructure improvements.

Housing Issues

The Kasson Public School is located near the historic center of town, just two blocks off Main Street. The building is within easy walking distance of the Mayo Family Clinic, Erdman’s Grocery Store, a pharmacy, and a movie theater, among other services. The school’s tri-partite plan, thick bearing walls, and concrete and tile floors would help to minimize interior and exterior noise. The building offers amenities such as large windows, wood floors, and wide hallways that would appeal to tenants. The building is situated in a park-like setting with a view of the city and room for parking.

These features would seem to make the school building a nearly ideal candidate for redevelopment as multi-tenant housing, and at least one private developer has prepared schematic plans and cost projections showing how such a project could work. A number of people suggested that the school’s location would make it a good candidate for redevelopment as senior housing. To be economically viable however, redevelopment of the building for housing would require maximizing the number of units within the building. Several factors work against this type of reuse:

- The city has indicated a strong desire to retain the site and/or building for public use.
- The school has a relatively compact floor plate, which could make it difficult to create a sufficient number of housing units to provide positive cash flow.
- A significant portion of the school building’s interior spaces, notably the gymnasium and lunchroom areas, would be difficult to convert into acceptable housing units.
- Housing would require an extensive—and expensive--amount of new plumbing, electrical, and mechanical infrastructure.
- Current zoning prohibits high-density residential development on the school site, and the Kasson Planning Commission indicated some reservations about rezoning.
- Neighbors, officials, and other individuals have expressed concerns about housing development targeted toward certain constituencies, such as low income residents.

DISPOSITION ALTERNATIVES

Do-Nothing

Under this scenario, the 1918 school building would simply be allowed to remain in its current state, with no active intervention from the city or preservation advocacy groups. Current levels of landscape maintenance and snow removal would continue; the city would continue to store snow in the parking area during winter months; upper level windows would remain unsecured; and area law enforcement groups would continue to use the building for training.

Advantages

- Would require only minimal maintenance and operating costs.
- Would save the costs of hazardous materials abatement and demolition.
- Would allow the city to retain ownership of the site for future use.
- Allows for potential rehabilitation/reuse of the school building in the future.
- Would allow time for the community to engage in a detailed planning process, to explore potential for grants and other funding, and to market the property to outside developers.

Disadvantages

- Failure to secure the building, resolve water problems, and continued use for destructive police training activities would allow deterioration of building to continue, making it more expensive to rehabilitate in the future.
- As the building continues to deteriorate, neighbors are increasingly likely to view it as an eyesore.
- Allowing the building to lie dormant does not accomplish community goals of using the property for a public use, such as a library or community center.
- Citizens would justifiably wonder if it was fiscally responsible for the city to trade the value of infrastructure improvements to acquire the property from the school district.

Mothball

Under this scenario, the city would take steps to halt further deterioration of the building. The integrity of the exterior envelope would be restored by boarding over upper level windows, securing the exterior entrance to the boiler room, etc. Extensions would be added to rain leaders to direct water away from the foundation, fill would be added to establish positive drainage in the courtyard area, and a portable pump would be installed in the boiler room to remove excess water. Snow would no longer be stored on the parking area; destructive training activities inside the building would be discontinued. Carpets and other materials conducive to mold growth would be removed from the building, and the building would be ventilated to minimize mold and mildew. Regular security checks would minimize intrusions by vandals. Maintenance of the grounds would continue, window coverings would be painted, and other steps would be taken to keep the building from becoming a neighborhood eyesore.

Advantages

- Would halt further deterioration of the building.
- Most of the work required could be completed by city crews or volunteers with minimal expenditures for materials.
- Would save the costs of hazardous materials abatement and demolition.
- Would allow the city to retain ownership of the site for future use.
- Would allow for potential rehabilitation/reuse of the school building in the future.
- Would allow time for the community to engage in a detailed planning process, to explore potential for grants and other funding, and to market the property to outside developers.

Disadvantages

- Allowing the building to lie dormant would not accomplish community goals of using the property for a public use, such as a library or community center.
- Citizens would justifiably wonder if it was fiscally responsible for the city to trade the value of infrastructure improvements to acquire the property from the school district.

Phased Rehabilitation for a Public Purpose

Under this scenario, the building would be rehabilitated in stages as a multi-use community center. Sections not being actively rehabilitated would be mothballed, although at a higher level than previously described. For example, mothballing under this plan could include installation of energy-efficient windows throughout the building, installation of a “zoned” HVAC system that would allow unused portions to be ventilated and minimally heated.

Advantages

- Would enable the city to retain ownership of the site
- Would enable the city to achieve multiple stated goals—not just preservation of a historic buildings, but also concentration of public functions near downtown, the need for new library space, and a desire for community meeting and recreation space, etc.
- Would allow rehabilitation to take place over time, as funding and political will allowed.
- Cost of demolition could be applied toward rehabilitation work.
- As each stage of the rehabilitation was completed, existing city facilities (the library building, and city hall) could be redeveloped for new uses or sold. If properties were sold, proceeds could be applied toward rehabilitation of the school.
- As rehabilitation work was completed, appearance of the building would improve: the building would no longer be in danger of being an eyesore.

Disadvantages

- A phased rehabilitation could not begin immediately. The community would still have to complete planning for the facility, and pursue potential sources of funding.
- A phased rehabilitation would require a significant expenditure of public funds, which could be a difficult prospect under current economic conditions.
- Some Kasson residents have suggested that a new use—especially a public use—could generate traffic and activity that would be unpopular in a quiet neighborhood.

Rehabilitation by a Private Developer

Under this scenario, the 1918 building would be sold to a private developer, who would redevelop and operate the building as a non-public project.

Advantages

- The city could place conditions on the sale to ensure that the building was preserved.
- The city would accomplish the goal of preservation with no expenditure of public funds.
- Proceeds from sale could be used to offset costs of acquiring land and erecting a new building for a library or community center.
- This approach could alleviate criticism from both preservationists and from those who do not want tax dollars spent on public projects.

Disadvantages

- The city would lose control of desirable site.
- The work could not begin immediately—time would be required to market the building, evaluate development proposals, and make certain the developer could complete and operate the project.
- Current zoning for the site limits potential types of reuse, and could make it difficult for a developer to realize positive cash flow from the project.

Rehabilitation as a Public/Private Partnership

Under this scenario, the city would retain ownership of the 1918 building and site, but would enter into a long-term lease agreement with a private developer. The building would be rehabilitated as a multi-use library/community center, with the city as a tenant. As one longtime resident noted, a public/private redevelopment “has a better ring to it,” although he also pointed out that it would be better if a private developer came from out of town—otherwise he feared that some local residents would feel that the developer was “getting rich off the city.”

Advantages

- The city would retain control of an important site.
- The city would accomplish its stated goals of preserving historic buildings, providing improved space for a library, establishing a community center, etc.
- The city would be able to accomplish multiple goals with little up-front expenditure of public funds.
- The developer could utilize incentives such as the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit program that could reduce the cost of the project.
- Since the city would retain ownership of the building, the project might qualify for grant/loan programs ordinarily reserved for units of government.
- Costs of demolition could be applied toward rehabilitation work.
- As each stage of the rehabilitation was completed, existing city facilities (the library building and city hall) could be redeveloped for new uses or sold. If properties were sold, proceeds could be applied toward rehabilitation of the school.

Disadvantages

- The work could not begin immediately—time would be required to market the building, evaluate development proposals, and make certain the developer could complete and operate the project.
- The city would have to enter into a long-term lease agreement, and would have to pay “rent” on a regular basis.
- This scenario would be legally complex.
- It might be difficult for a developer to complete the project in phases because of the need for the project to generate revenue.

Demolition-Clear and Hold the Site

Under this scenario, the 1918 school building would be demolished, the site would be restored, and the land would be held in reserve for future redevelopment.

Advantages

- This alternative would be less expensive than any sort of rehabilitation or new construction.
- This alternative would allow the city to retain control of an important site.
- This alternative would minimize the amount of time, effort, and money the city would have to devote to maintaining security at the site.
- Some neighbors might welcome the addition of “green space,” and perceive the site as a new neighborhood amenity.
- This alternative would alleviate concerns of taxpayers reluctant to take on the burden of rehabilitation or construction of new library, community center, or other facilities.
- This scenario would allow time to plan for eventual construction of new facilities.

Disadvantages

- This alternative would significantly reduce the number of options available for consideration as the community considers how to achieve its stated goal of creating a library and /or civic center.
- This alternative would require a significant expenditure for hazardous materials abatement, demolition, and site restoration.
- Under this scenario, the city would have exchanged a significant amount of money in the form of forgiven assessments and demolition costs in order to create a vacant lot.
- This alternative would accomplish none of the city’s stated goals.
- This alternative would destroy a designated historic property, which means that additional mitigation (photo recordation, etc.) might be required before demolition could proceed.

Demolition-Build New Library or Multi-use Facility on the Existing Site

Under this scenario, the Kasson Public School building would be demolished and a new public library building or multi-use community center building would be erected on the site.

Advantages

- This alternative would allow the city to retain control of the site.
- This alternative would allow construction of a purpose-built structure to house the public library and other public uses. The desire for clear sight lines, a one-story facility, etc., would be relatively easy to integrate into the design of the new building.
- A new building could be designed to maximize the use of “green” materials and technologies.

Disadvantages

- This alternative would significantly reduce the number of options available for consideration as the community considers how to achieve its stated goal of creating a library and /or civic center.
- This alternative would require a significant expenditure for hazardous materials abatement and demolition.
- This alternative could not be accomplished immediately. Time would be needed to plan a new facility, prepare cost estimates, and explore sources of funding.
- Construction of a new building would require citizen approval, which could be difficult to obtain in difficult economic times.
- Cost projections have consistently suggested that it would be more expensive to erect a new building on the site than to rehabilitate the existing one.
- This alternative would violate the city’s stated objective of fostering historic preservation.
- It would be difficult and expensive to duplicate the quality of design, materials and construction evident in the existing school building in a new facility.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past six months, the five members of the Kasson Public School reuse team have been involved in an intensive effort to gather, analyze and synthesize a mountain of information that will enable us to make a reality-based recommendation about the future of the 1918 building. Our information has come from two main sources—the building itself; and the residents of Kasson and the surrounding area. Well aware of the prolonged and often difficult debate that has raged over the fate of this property since it was vacated in 2005, the team sought to develop and apply a process that was systematic, thorough, inclusive, transparent, impartial, and practical.

The team began its investigations by taking a hard look at the building itself. The two architects and team leader spent one entire day in (and on) the building, examining its structure, exterior envelope, site conditions, spatial characteristics, mechanical systems, materials, and ornamental features. The building has a few problems, as do all buildings, old or new--but the building is eminently reusable. It is an asset whose quality of design and construction could not easily be duplicated in Kasson or anywhere else today, and it should not be discarded.

As the team made its way through the weeks of interviews, phone conversations, e-mail exchanges, and meetings that went into the production of this report, it soon became evident that the possibilities for the future of this longstanding local landmark had been reduced to just two: preserve it or tear it down. This reduction of what should be a vast spectrum of possibilities for a building of this quality and character to merely black or white, seems attributable more to the polarization, posturing, and hard feelings that inevitably arise from lengthy conflict than from any innate attributes of the building, the community, or the economy.

Over the past months, the team has listened to the community's concerns, has taken careful note of the community's expressed needs, values and desires. Team members have considered a variety of new uses for the building and site, have discussed a range of alternatives ranging from "do nothing" to demolition, have examined alternative ownership and financing models, and have sought to identify some middle ground that would enable the people of Kasson to utilize an existing asset and work together to accomplish a common goal.

Summary of Findings

As the team went over the list of ideas provided by Kasson-area residents, it immediately became apparent that there was very little local interest in utilizing the school building or site for an income-generating function. The list of ideas fell squarely into the realm of public use. Consequently, as team members began to formulate their recommendations, they began with the assumption that whatever happened to the school/site, projects that would fulfill a generally agreed-upon public purpose would have the greatest potential for success.

The one exception to the public reuse option came in the area of housing. Although there are numerous obstacles to such a reuse, including current market conditions, city zoning

requirements, the city's interest in retaining ownership and control of the school site, and neighborhood concerns about the compatibility certain types of housing with surrounding residential areas, several housing scenarios are explored in this report.

It also became evident that, for a project at the site to succeed, it would have to do more than simply preserve a historic building. In looking back through the information gathered over the past few months, the team also began to identify goals that had repeatedly been articulated by individuals, officials, and in published materials such as the city's comprehensive plan, in an effort to find a creative use/reuse of the site/building that would reflect community values and satisfy stated goals, including:

- The city's official commitment to historic preservation
- A strongly expressed interest in maintaining the 1918 School site for public use, and a desire to control development at that location.
- A desire to enhance the vitality of the community's central business district by maintaining a critical mass of commercial and civic functions near Main Street.
- A general awareness of the need to expand and improve the public library, as well as widespread support for the idea.
- A clearly articulated interest in creating a community center for the citizens of Kasson, and perhaps the surrounding area.
- A stated commitment to sustainability.

An ideal reuse of the school/site should keep the site in public hands, be politically viable, be attainable within a reasonable window of time, and be possible to complete in a fiscally responsible manner. It should also contribute to the vitality of the community's traditional downtown, help to provide the community with a much-needed new library space, provide a venue for public gatherings of all sorts, and be compatible with the surrounding neighborhood.

Recommendation

In formulating its recommendation for the Kasson School building, the reuse team assigned priorities to options that would:

- Keep the largest number of options open.
- Reflect community values.
- Enable the community to achieve as many of its stated goals as possible.
- Fill unmet needs that have been identified and supported by a large segment of the public.
- Be economically or socially viable. An economically viable project is defined as one that would generate sufficient revenue to be self-sustaining. A socially viable project is one that serves a generally acknowledged public need, and that citizens would be willing to subsidize through the tax structure.

The reuse team recommends that the community of Kasson should accept the challenge of rehabilitating the 1918 Kasson Public School Building as a multi-use library/community center/city hall.

Implementation

-Mothball the building. The city of Kasson should take immediate steps to halt further deterioration of the 1918 building by mothballing the building as outlined above.

-Appoint a citizen task force to oversee a systematic planning effort for rehabilitating the former Kasson Public School as a multi-use library/community center/city hall. Because the school building and site are city-owned property, the task force should be comprised entirely of individuals residing and voting in the city of Kasson. The task force should have the authority to direct and draw upon the expertise of appropriate city staff and outside experts. The task force should be provided with a sufficient budget to complete its work.

-Undertake a systematic, thorough, and inclusive planning effort for the project. Under the leadership of the local task force, and in consultation with appropriate outside professionals the community should develop a comprehensive architectural program for a multi-use library/community center. The planning process should be designed specifically to include representatives from the library board, the city council, and other individuals and groups with a direct stake in the planning process.

-Examine the potential for both a phased and total rehabilitation of the school building. As noted earlier, a phased rehabilitation would offer the potential advantage of allowing the community to meet its objectives of improving its public library facilities and creating a community center in a shorter period of time and at lower cost than either a full rehabilitation of the school building, or construction of an entirely new facility.

-Investigate ways to complete the rehabilitation either as a publicly financed project or as a public-private development partnership. The task force, with the help of city staff and outside experts should fully investigate the range of incentives, grants, and other financial instruments that could be employed to reduce the cost of completing a rehabilitation of the school building.

-Assemble a package of local incentives that could be offered to a private developer. Working with the city council, the Kasson EDA, Dodge County, and other staff and officials, the task force should assemble a package of incentives that could be offered to a private developer as part of a public-private development plan. A public/private option could move the project timetable ahead, would allow the city to retain control of the site, and could enable the community to complete the project at a lower cost than it could with public financing. The task force should also reopen discussion of forging a joint-powers agreement with surrounding communities to complete a community center project.

-Market the building to potential development partners. Once the planning is in place, and a package of incentives has been assembled, the community can determine whether or not it makes sense to pursue the option of completing the rehabilitation as part of a public/private collaboration. If so, the task force should actively market the project to developers.

-Allow time for investigation. At this point, efforts to create a community center appear to be at a standstill. City officials have indicated that, given current economic conditions and competing capital improvement priorities, completion of any sort of new library facility is at least five years away. With that horizon in mind, the task force should be given ample time to complete its work in a thorough, systematic, and transparent way without fear that the building will be demolished in the interim.

-Engage and educate the public about the potential for rehabilitating the school for a new public purpose. The task force should make a concerted effort to provide information about the potential services that could be provided in a rehabilitated school building. The group should provide information about the actual physical condition of the building and how problems would be solved. The task force should outline and publicize steps and a timeline for the project. The group should clearly define the amount of taxation, if any, that a property owner would incur if the project were to move forward.

-Allow the public to weigh in. Regardless of whether the project is completed as a public effort or as a public/private collaboration, the citizens of Kasson should be given an opportunity to participate in the planning process, should be given accurate and plentiful information about facilities, financing, and timing, and then should be given an opportunity to decide how to proceed.