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FEATURED

Reading discusses school during special session

By Adam Blake adam@emporiamagazine.com Jun 1, 2018 Updated Jun 1, 2018



Adam Blake/GazetteCity of Reading officials took suggestions from community members on the future of the Reading Elementary

The Reading City Council hosted a special session Thursday evening to determine the future of the Reading Elementary School building.

On April 11, the USD 251 Board of Education voted to close the school in order to reduce expenses for the district. Board members said they believed upwards of \$200,000 would be saved by the decision, and that the best course of action would be to sell the building. While May 18 marked the last official school day, the Reading Elementary building will not formally close until June 30.

Thursday, city officials said they did not know the exact cost of purchasing the building from the school district — or a date it needed to be bought by — but stressed they wanted to gain community input before moving forward.

“We’re basically just looking for ideas about what the building may be used for in the future or if there’s other things we should look at doing with it,” Reading Mayor Todd Hensley said. “The main thinking is that the building has to draw some kind of revenue to help cover the cost of the insurance, the utilities and the upkeep. Whether it’s renting space, leasing space or whatever else, we just want to know what the community would like to see us do with the building.”

Hensley estimated the cost of insurance for the building to run between \$12,000 and \$15,000 a year with electric costs tentatively figured at around \$800 a month. Members of the council stressed there was a good chance the building would prove more costly to the city if it remained empty.

“If [the school] is just a community building that gets used twice a year, that leaves it open to people coming by and throwing rocks at windows or vandalizing it in other ways,” Council Member Malonne Davies said. “If it’s getting regular use, then it’s less susceptible to all that. I believe it would affect the insurance costs also.”

Community members expressed hope that the school building could continue to serve Reading in some way, but agreed it may be wiser to consider selling it to a third party. Council members said recent updates to the building — including a new gas meter and recently-updated heating units — could make the building more attractive to potential buyers or renters.

In all, a wide range of ideas were pitched throughout the discussion. Some of the most popular included transforming the building into doctor's offices, an assisted living center, a community building for weddings and meetings, a document storage facility or even a seasonal hotel for hunters and Wolf Creek outage workers. Davies admitted that perhaps the biggest obstacle in marketing the building would be its location.

“A big issue is that [Reading] is off the beaten path, so to speak,” Davies said. “Others might say in the middle of nowhere — so, if you're an organization looking to bring in a guest speaker, they'll probably want to be in a location close to an airport, for instance. It may not make a whole lot of sense for everybody to book events here.”

“There's also an issue of broadband internet,” Lyon County Commissioner Scott Briggs said. “Big businesses or doctors are going to want high-speed internet, and it's not going to be wireless out here. It's pretty hard to run fiber cost-effectively from Emporia to here, but there are USDA grants [ValuNet] is working on applying for to reach out and experiment with some of the smaller and more rural communities.”

In concluding the meeting, council members said they appreciated the community's interest in the ongoing process, and vowed to get more concrete financial information before next week's regularly-scheduled action session.

“I think the general consensus of everyone in this room is that it's too good of a building to just stand there and do nothing,” Hensley said. “We're going to continue looking at ideas.”

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