

Can Vinton afford to lose, keep Braille School campus

Vinton Cannot Afford to Lose the Braille School Campus, but Can We Afford to Keep It?

Several years ago, I sat with Dawn Pettengill at a hearing when the Board of Regents decided to consolidate all of the students at the Vinton facility with the other students at the Council Bluffs facility. I hoped at the time that this was a temporary situation. I hoped that somehow the school would be returned to its former use. I grew up visiting my mother on campus when she worked as House Parent. We had wrestling practice and winter swimming there as well. I hoped that it would return, but unfortunately that is not going to happen. So what do we do now?

I served 11 years on the Vinton City Council. I have spent countless hours with other council members in budget meetings trying to ensure that services and infrastructure of Vinton were the focus of the spending. This facility has the potential to be a great asset or an incred-

ible burden on the residents of the city.

There are many upsides to the acquisition.

A new splash pad on the west side of Vinton.

New softball and soccer fields for the Vinton Park and Rec and other local club teams.

Commercial development of the vacant land along Hwy 218.

The swimming pool at the Braille school is the only available facility for the Vinton-Shellsburg High School swimming program. The Vinton Aquatic Club (VAC) has used this facility for 20 plus years to coach and train literally hundreds of young swimmers. Both of these programs have the potential of ending if the facility is closed.

Who could use the facility?

Would Kirkwood, Hawkeye Commu-



nity, Coe or Mount Mercy be interested in leasing space for an additional campus? Could Virginia Gay Hospitals use some of space for services such as rehab or nursing home facility? Maybe they could, but can the agreements be made in time to assure that the city is not left holding the bag?

How do you pay for it?

What happens when the buildings need repair? What happens when the pumps go out in the swimming pool and the primary filters need to be replaced? What happens when one of the primary lessors decides not to renew their lease? How does the city afford the insurance on the buildings?

How would the city be able to budget for these contingencies? The city does not have a large enough reserve in place to properly prepare for these types of issues.

Afford

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Afford: Consider all pros and cons

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It would take some time and a great deal of planning to properly account for all of the "What If" scenarios. It would take even more time to properly secure the additional funding needed just to account for the unexpected expenses.

There are \$1.5 million of needed repairs. That is an astronomical amount for the city to swallow in the tax rolls. I don't know if the regents would consider funding the repairs before the city would agree to take over the facility, but it would seem to me that they would have to at least bring it up to code before any transfer could take place. Removal of the asbestos would need to be a priority.

Remember. All of this is paid for with YOUR tax dollars.

Thinking LONG Term.

Adding this facility to the city's list of assets could prove to be a VERY expensive, long-term burden. The facility has a annual operating budget of almost \$1 million. AmeriCorps, the primary tenant, is fully funded by the Federal Government. If that budget is cut or eliminated, how does the city fill that space on the campus? How long will it take to find a suitable and willing tenant to replace AmeriCorps? Six months? Two years? How would the city pay for the upkeep of the facility without any tenants?

Are the property owners in the city of Vinton willing to foot the tax bill that would be required to maintain the facility indefinitely?

Are the citizens of Vinton prepared to pay the substantial bill to update the facility as needed?

I hope they can.

My first reaction to hearing this news was that the city must take action and acquire the facility. They must preserve the history and the legacy that the Braille School has brought to our community. I believe that this is the first reaction of most of the community. I personally hope that there is a way for the city to acquire and responsibly fund this massive facility.

My second reaction is one of caution and concern. This could truly be a never ending burden to the finances of the city for a myriad of reasons. The impact to the tax rolls will be substantial even if all of the tenants stay on long term. Additional tax dollars will be needed to build out the "Wish List" of ideas for the campus. More employees will need to be added to the city's payroll. All paid by your tax dollars.

I would encourage all of you in the Vinton and the surrounding area to consider all of the pros and cons before pressing your elected officials to make a decision. This is a monumental decision to be made by the council and they will need your support through this journey.

David Redlinger

Former Mayor-Pro-Tem

Vinton City Council (2003 - 2014)