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SUNDAY  
DECEMBER 5, 2010  
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*Division V Ohio high school football champs*

## IRISH WIN 3RD STRAIGHT TITLE FOR URSULINE

See **SPORTS, B1** for story and more photos



ROBERT K. YOSAY | THE VINDICATOR

Ursuline High football players hoist their Division V state championship trophy after their 51-21 state-title victory.

*Many Valley school buildings no longer have history classes, but they are ...*

## PRESERVING OUR PAST



GEOFFREY HAUSCHILD | THE VINDICATOR

Mal Culp, supervisor of facilities and operations for Austintown schools, walks through the circular cafeteria during a tour of the former Austintown Middle School at 5800 Mahoning Ave. The 94-year-old building closed four years ago, and the district is considering demolishing it.

By **KRISTINE GILL**  
kgill@vindy.com

**AUSTINTOWN**  
ARON TURNER WANTS TO SEE the former Austintown Middle School “return to nature.” For the Morrow County teacher and history enthusiast, anything is better than bulldozing it. “When it comes to the presence of a building or a lot, the building always wins,” he said. Turner, 28, operates the website [www.OldOhioSchools.com](http://www.OldOhioSchools.com) where he keeps track of abandoned, demolished and “endangered” buildings in every public school district in the state. Turner labeled the 94-year-old building at

5800 Mahoning Ave. as endangered when Austintown had the new middle school built at 800 South Raccoon Road. Now the district might spend more than \$500,000 to demolish the building in the hope that it can more easily sell a vacant lot. That money would come from the general fund. “That’s why it’s so painful,” said Mal Culp, supervisor of facilities and operations for Austintown Local Schools. Austintown is one of 612 Ohio school districts at some stage of renovating, demolishing or selling old schools to accommodate changing student populations and improve facilities. Though quality education in a safe environment is a district’s main concern, historic buildings are often lost in the process.

“There was a lot of personality in this building,” Culp said. Culp said the building’s walls are concrete, which prevents technology upgrades and the installation of air conditioning. The ceiling fell in a few years ago in some classrooms, and there were issues with heating. Most of the classrooms were smaller than the 900 square feet required by the state. Out of the 150 historic Mahoning County schools listed on Turner’s site, 106 are listed as having been demolished or abandoned, and 13 are listed as endangered or pending demolition. “There’s just a lot of history being razed,” Turner said.

See **SCHOOLS, A4**

“THERE WAS A LOT OF PERSONALITY IN THIS BUILDING.”

MAL CULP, supervisor of facilities and operations for Austintown Local School District

Culp, right, stands in the gymnasium of the former middle school near Austintown Center. The school housed thousands of Austintown middle-school students from 1968 to 2007. Before that, it served as Austintown Fitch High School for six decades.



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# SCHOOLS

Continued from A1

## BUILD OR RENOVATE?

Although the district has the final say about its buildings, the state has some input.

Franklin Brown is the planning director for the Ohio School Facilities Commission, created in 1997 under former Gov. George Voinovich with the goal to improve all Ohio school buildings. Brown estimates that 1,000 of the 3,500 school buildings around Ohio in 1997 will be demolished or sold.

“Sometimes the building has a very strong historical significance in a community, and in other cases it doesn’t: It’s just an old building,” Brown said.

The OSFC, along with teams of builders and architects, works with school districts to determine how best to improve each building situation. The commission is about halfway through the list of districts, which it ranks in order of wealth to serve the greatest need first.

The OSFC follows a guideline that says a school should consider building a new structure if the cost of renovating the existing structure exceeds two-thirds the cost of building new.

“We’ve had buildings that fell 50 percent on that scale and they built new, and we’ve had buildings well over 100 percent on that scale that we’ve renovated,” Brown said.

Either way, money is available through OSFC to assist with those costs. And though the commission doesn’t have an official stance on the decision to build or renovate, Brown said the OSFC likes to see taxpayers’ dollars last longer.

“We do like to think of the buildings we put taxpayer dollars in still being around 50, 60 years from now,” he said, “and there’s a much higher likelihood that will be the case if it’s new construction today than if the building is already 40 or 50 years old.”

Once a district decides to build new, the old structure is either offered to charter schools for a price or demolished to make room for the new school on the same land. No charter schools were interested in the large AMS building.

If a charter school doesn’t want the building, it’s put up for auction. If no one bids, as in Austintown’s case in September, the district can open the sale to the public.

Abandoned buildings become eyesores. That’s one reason OSFC encourages a quick sale or demolition. It can be costly for a district to pay the gas bill to prevent pipes from freezing, and schools such as the old AMS, which has been vacant for four years, still have a security system paid for by the district to prevent vandalism. Culp said the building has not been heated during that time.

Some say the process doesn’t allow much chance for interested buyers to claim the property and leaves iconic architecture subject to the wrecking ball.

Inside the old AMS, paint is peeling from every wall. Notes from students that read “Goodbye AMS” have not been washed from the chalk and dry-erase boards. In the auditorium, seats have been torn from their rows and sold to alumni who cleaned them up. Many of the desks and lockers were sold to residents during an auction, and the rest were donated to an Indian reservation starting a school in the West.

Austintown police and firefighters have been using the building to stage emergencies for officer training and rubber-bullet fragments line the hallways where they practiced. Several wooden doors hang from their hinges, casualties of mock break-ins.

## HISTORY ATTACHED

Culp attended class at the old AMS building when it was the high school and his parents are alumni. While Falcon pride runs deep, Culp said he hasn’t received complaints from the community about razing the building.

“More people are concerned about it becoming an eyesore,” he said.



Student messages still fill chalkboards at the former Austintown Middle School, which closed four years ago.

Oftentimes, concerned residents have the power to save such buildings.

Rebecca Rogers, a historic preservation consultant from Poland, has written proposals for several area sites to gain acceptance to the National Register of Historic Places. Unless a school or other site is registered, its only protection comes from enthusiastic residents.

“It seemed it worked if there was a local group wildly in love with the school and the education they got there and the visual appearance in the neighborhood,” Rogers said.

She said many people don’t understand the “greenness and value in renovating a building” and that even the most ancient of structures can be improved to include modern technology.

“It’s one of the best ways to be green,” Rogers said. “Then you have the sentimental value of something that is remembered by lots and lots of people. I happen to think that’s an important component to have things with some history attached to them.”

An old school can be nominated to the national register if its design or architecture sets it apart or if the building embodies some aspect of an important event or time period. Even then, being on the register does not guarantee a structure will be protected, only that it will gain special recognition.

The Rayen School at 222 Wick Ave. is on the register for being the first Youngstown high school, built in 1886. Thirteen of the 150 historical schools in Mahoning County are pending demolition.

Many of the demolished once stood in Youngstown, while Austintown claims a handful of those pending demolition, including Frank Ohl Intermediate, Lynn Kirk, Watson, Woodside and Lloyd Elementary.

Project Administrator Dennis Kaplan of OSFC, who is working with Austintown on its renovation projects, said those schools will be demolished to make room for two new structures in the next few years.

## PRESERVING THE PAST

For Turner, saving a building is as important as improving a school. But he doesn’t propose that districts pour millions into the renovation of a building too far in disrepair.

He wants to see buildings sold to others willing to make that investment and retool existing structures in what is known as adaptive reuse.

Sean Timms, 40, of Youngstown was willing to do that. He bought the old West Side School in Youngstown from the Hungarian Presbyterian Church on Mahoning Avenue in January 2009 for \$49,000.

Known as the Calvin Center, it was built in 1901 by famed Youngstown architect P. Ross Berry. The church acquired it in the late 1940s.

A few improvements, seven months and \$20,000 later, the structure at 755 Mahoning Avenue is ready to serve as the arts center Timms envisioned. There are already spaces for yoga, belly dancing and a photography businesses rented out in the 18,500-square-foot building.

Timms purchased the property for its history and location and was thankful to Hungarian Presbyterian for having preserved the building’s integrity for so long.

“They saved that building,” he said. “They heated it — and it’s not cheap to heat it — to keep pipes from freezing. Had they not done that, it wouldn’t have been

feasible. It really was a gem.”

Timms is one of several entrepreneurs who have invested in old Mahoning County school buildings.

Lincoln High School in Sebring was built in 1908 and is now an apartment complex. Highland Avenue School in Struthers, built in 1909, was at one point the Youngstown College of Masotherapy, which has since gone out of business. Charter schools including South Side Academy and National Heritage Academy inhabit two former Youngstown school buildings, South High School on Market Street and Stambaugh School on Donald Avenue. Rising Star Baptist Church on Wardle Avenue was once Thorn Hill Avenue School, built in 1916.

Donna DeBlasio, a professor at Youngstown State University and the director for the Center for Historic Preservation, favors adaptive reuse.

A building “maybe old, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t



Ceiling panels lie on the floor of a classroom featuring student artwork, during a tour of the old Austintown Middle School at 5800 Mahoning Ave. on Friday afternoon.

have good bones,” she said. “There are other ways to use buildings. Maybe it becomes a day-care center or a senior center or it becomes shops and restaurants. It’s thinking creatively.”

DeBlasio has worked to extend the Wick Park Historic District and even helps private homeowners to have their properties added to the register.

“We try to make good ef-

orts to keep what we can of our past because it is a part of us and the community. Not just here, everywhere,” she said. “We don’t want our communities to look the same.”

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