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## Historic neighbor defended

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Community wants versus ongoing liabilities face St. Pius X

### **Summary:**

Chatham Savannah Youth Futures Authority leaders came to hear from the community Thursday night on the future of the St. Pius X Family Resource Center. Jan Skutch

Chatham Savannah Youth Futures Authority leaders came to hear from the community Thursday night on the future of the St. Pius X Family Resource Center.

They left with an earful, including a community voice that people wanted the center or something like it to remain.

"No, we did not have a plan before we came here," Executive Director Edward Chisolm assured a roomful of neighborhood folk and area leaders. "We want to do whatever is necessary to be sure this community has a community center. (That) We are proud of, obviously safe, and that serves the community."

At issue is what is the next step for the Family Resource Center in eastside Savannah that provided programs and support for children and families there.

A study completed in December found it will take an estimated \$5 million to renovate and replace code violations or \$5.3 million to replace the structure.

In the meantime, Youth Futures who owns the building has given tenants until April 1 to move out.

"The longer we stay here the longer we expose ourselves to something might happen" Chisolm cautioned the audience.

With consultant Charles McMillan acting as facilitator and Chisolm fielding most of the questions, community input was invited.

Some wanted to know why April was chosen instead of June when the school year ends.

"We're not concerned the building is going to fall down on you," said engineer John Kern, whose group conducted the assessment at issue.

But he said so much needed addressing that the costs of renovation and a new building were about the same.

He listed lack of parking, leaking roofs and walls, substandard windows and electrical systems and an air-conditioning system that sometimes worked and at others did not as among the issues his study addressed.

"In the 50s we did things differently than we do now," he said.

"I think we have to act sooner rather than later. A lot can happen between now and the end of the year," Chisolm added

The structure was built in 1953 as a Catholic high school for black students, The Catholic Diocese of Savannah deeded it to the Youth Futures in 1993 and the family resource center opened the following year as a state-of-the art center.

"The city does not own St. Pius," Chisolm told the group.

"We've got kids in the neighborhood who need someplace to go everyday," Joan Tilson pointed out.

Both Chisolm and McMillan stressed that the April date could be amended, but McMillan pointed out. "It's an issue of dollars."

"If we can make adjustments to the time, we will," Chisolm said.

The collaborative leadership is committed to the eastside, he said.

If St. Pius is leveled, it will end the history and legacy of that facility, Chisolm conceded. "The new St. Pius would be a new legacy."

Chisolm repeatedly told the audience the collaborative leadership is open to their concerns and suggestions.

Those included seeking historical status for the building to bake sales and letter writing to support the effort.

Freddie Patrick pointed out that the current cost estimates likely would grow larger.

Chisolm agreed.

"Everyday we keep it open the bigger that number will become." he said.

And he noted the diminishing financial resources will be there in the foreseeable future.

"I think we need to involve the community more," said Regina Thomas. "We are willing to do whatever it takes to keep this building here."

Afterward, Chisolm said, "The community clearly wants that particular building."

But he said the authority still must wrestle with keeping that building and the liabilities it presents while continuing to serve the community.

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