

LONG ISLAND / TOWNS

Garden City polls residents on preserving St. Paul's School building



Garden City Mayor Mary Carter Flanagan said a poll shows the village has support to try to save the iconic St. Paul's School. Credit: Rick Kopstein

By Ted Phillips

ted.phillips@newsday.com

Updated November 16, 2023 5:45 pm

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In the latest effort to save Garden City's ornate St. Paul's School after three decades in limbo, preservationists are relying on a poll to determine the next steps.

The village on Oct. 21 polled residents on whether the nearly 140-year-old building should be preserved or demolished. Residents had to cast a ballot in person or by absentee ballot to be counted in the poll. The majority – 60.7% – of the 4,339 residents who participated in the poll said they wanted to preserve the building. The poll is nonbinding.

Preservation supporters extol the building's history and architectural beauty and see an opportunity to provide a community center for the village's nearly 23,000 residents. Opponents say the cost of restoring and renovating the building would be too high for residents.

To pay for it, the village may need to borrow by issuing bonds or find alternative financing.

'A plan for St. Paul's building'

Mayor Mary Carter Flanagan said the poll shows the village has the support to continue to try to save the building.

"Our goal is to move forward and come up with a plan for St. Paul's building that preserves part or all of the building that has wide community support and can be executed," Flanagan said.

She said the next step is to commission a "needs assessment" study to determine what kinds of uses residents would want for the 125,000-square-foot building.

A 2013 community needs study posted on the village [website](#) concluded that residents wanted opportunities and space to participate in special events and athletic facilities.

Whatever plan emerges, it "needs to be supported by some data as to community needs and what the community would support," Flanagan said.

In 2011, Garden City voters [rejected a bond referendum](#) to borrow \$3.7 million to demolish the school.

“The vote made me very hopeful that it’s given us some momentum to get this project moving,” Tara Cubie, preservation director at Preservation Long Island, a Cold Spring Harbor-based nonprofit organization that advocates for historic preservation, said Wednesday.

In an October letter to the village trustees, Cubie wrote that “A rehabilitated St. Paul’s would become a center of community life in Garden City.”

Considering 3 scenarios

St. Paul’s School was constructed between 1879 and 1883 upon the [commission of Cornelia Stewart](#), widow of Alexander Turney Stewart, according to the village website. Stewart was a business tycoon who founded Garden City. The school closed in 1991 and the village bought the property in 1993 for \$7.25 million – which includes fields and smaller buildings. For thirty years, village officials have struggled to formulate a plan for the building.

Manhattan-based Vakota Architecture PLLC and Westerman Construction gave preliminary estimates to the village in a September report for three scenarios: demolition; restoration and repurposing of the building; and “facadism,” which would preserve the building’s facade while demolishing most of the building so that an entirely new building would be built behind it.

The firms estimated that demolition and restoration of grass and trees on the site would cost between \$12.8 million and \$17.6 million.

Restoring the building without creating usable areas would cost an estimated \$39.6 million. Finishing the interior as usable space would cost an estimated \$300 per square foot as much as \$30 million in additional costs.

Adding a theater would cost \$5 million and an indoor pool would cost \$7 million, according to the estimates. Saving the facade and building a new building behind it would cost between \$87.5 million and \$157.5 million.

Opponents say the village's limited resources could be better spent.

"My view is to demolish the building, save historical pieces from it, maybe use the clock tower as part of the element of a park," said Steven Gorray, 75, a retired business adviser and Garden City resident.

Preserving 'an architectural gem'

Garden City resident Jim Apostolides, 71, a mergers and acquisitions banker, said the idea of spending millions to create community space without specific uses "doesn't make sense."

"The village is going to have to finance this thing with debt, and it's expensive and it's a lot of debt," Apostolides said.

According to the village website, the project could add between 9.9% to 19.97% to residents' property taxes, depending on what is built and whether the debt is for 15 years or 30 years.

"I grew up here and I've seen the village growing and flourishing, but we do know that there isn't enough space for not only children but for our seniors," said Danette Ceriano, a marketing professional and member of the St. Paul's Alliance, a community group. "So many surrounding towns have community centers and it's a bit almost unusual that ours doesn't."

Ceriano said community uses could be a theater, an indoor pool, creative arts, a senior center or STEM education programs.

"It's considered an architectural gem in the United States," said Kate Schmidt, an investment manager and a member of the Alliance. A phased-in approach that will build out about a quarter of the interior of the building and leave open the possibility to create additional usable space "allows generations down the road to make more decisions," she said.

Possible scenarios for St. Paul's School

- Demolish building and salvage architectural details: \$17.6 million
- Demolish building and don't salvage architectural details: \$12.8 million
- Preserve and build out 33,000 square feet of usable interior space: \$49.5 million
- Preserve and don't build out usable interior space: \$39.6 million
- Preserve only the building facade: \$46.4 million
- Preserve building facade to allow new building to be built behind it: \$37.5 million

Source: Vakota Architecture PLLC and Westerman Construction

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ted.phillips@newsday.com

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