



## Nonprofits look to purchase Austine School campus

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Austine School and the Vermont center for the deaf and hard of hearing. Photo by Zachary P. Stephens/Brattleboro Reformer

The Austine School campus may find new life as home for a group of area nonprofits. Some tenants who remained on the property after the closure of the school for deaf and hard of hearing students last year are looking into buying the property.

It's early in the process, but David Dunn, attorney for Brattleboro Savings and Loan, which holds the

first mortgage on the property, said nonprofits in the Brattleboro area are in discussions over how to rescue the historic campus from bankruptcy.

Dunn is also president of the board of the Winston Prouty Center for Child Development, which is backing the nonprofits' attempt to buy the Austine campus.

He said the nonprofit groups would share in the ownership of the campus, likely in a condominium association arrangement.

The Austine School and the Vermont Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing closed last fall after being unable to cover expenses as enrollment dwindled at the residential school.

The school also closed a program at the Williams Center, which served students who were deaf and hard of hearing as well as autistic.

The property is in Chapter 7 bankruptcy, and has a debt to the State of Vermont, which has a lien against the school.

According to the filing in January to the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Rutland, the state has a \$5.67 million lien against the school's real estate for capital appropriations made to or for the benefit of the Austine School over a number of years.

The real estate is valued at \$5,774,170, the statutory lien shows.

Assistant Attorney General Jacob A. Humbert on Wednesday said, "The State remains receptive to local efforts to structure a property sale within the current

bankruptcy case in hopes of re-purposing the facility to meet a variety of charitable, educational and civic purposes."

"But, the State would expect that any such sale process would contain a public auction component ensuring at least some testing of the market prior to sale," he said.

Humbert said though the state is a secured creditor through the statutory lien, "...The State still remains second in line behind secured creditor mortgagee Brattleboro Savings and Loan. Therefore, the bankruptcy estate will likely be unable to repay the State in full, absent a property sale amount sufficient to cover the Center's debts to both BS&L and the State."

In the January proof of claim filing to the U.S. Bankruptcy Court, the amount cited for the mortgage debt owed to Brattleboro Savings and Loan was \$2,438,743.

### *Austine School's history*

The Austine School was built with a \$50,000 gift bequeathed by U.S. Army Col. William Austine in 1904.

After debate in the Legislature at the time, it decided to open a school for deaf students in Vermont.

In 1912, the Austine School was opened, and it operated in its heyday with as many as 150 pupils. In 1914, Alexander Graham Bell was the first commencement speaker at the school.

The Austine campus is made up of more than 177 acres and has eight buildings.

Bill Gurney, president of the school and center when it closed, said Tuesday that before Austine closed, an effort to rent to nonprofits had begun as a way to try to bring in revenue when the school was struggling to stay afloat.

The cost of maintaining the campus "was really draining our endowment," Gurney said.

Before Austine had to close, The Garland School, a Waldorf school, moved onto campus and the Inspire School, a school for autistic students, rented space, as well as the New England Circus School, and the University of Vermont Extension Service.

"Those other organizations are still on campus, along with an outdoor adventure school called High Five," he said.

Gurney said \$3 million to \$4 million would be a fair price for the campus, adding that the state is willing to work with any organization which purchases the campus to address the state's lien.

"I'd love to see the campus fully utilized, it's a beautiful campus. It would be great to see it stay open for

nonprofit organizations in southeastern Vermont,” Gurney said.

### ***Brattleboro area legislators support proposal***

Sen. Becca Balint, D-Windham, on Tuesday said she, Rep. Valerie Stuart, D-Brattleboro, and Sen. Jeanette White, D-Windham, met last week with the executive director of the Winston Prouty Center, Chloe Learey, and Dunn.

“It was very exciting, because so many of us were heartbroken when the Austine School closed,” Balint said.

Balint said that in addition to the loss for the deaf and hard of hearing community, the campus itself is a visual gateway coming into Brattleboro and the closure was a loss to the community.

“It is a big property and we all had the same concern: Who could possibly take over the entire property?” Balint said.

Stuart said she wholeheartedly supports the idea as a Brattleboro legislator.

“I think it’s wonderful that the board of the Winston Prouty [Center] and David Dunn have come up with this idea ... I really give them a lot of credit for coming up with this idea and following through with it,” said Stuart.

One of the options under consideration is using the two dorms on the property for transitional housing.

The state spends about \$600,000 on hotel vouchers for transitional housing for people who are homeless in Windham County, Balint said.

“There’s this possibility that perhaps we could use the dorms for transitional housing and have wraparound services for those families,” said Balint.

She said she knows of families in Brattleboro who are living “in a motel on the strip.”

“As I was walking (on the campus) I could really see all the possibilities for getting people back on their feet in a lovely spot,” Balint said.

Josh Davis, director of Groundworks Collaborative, is one of the community partners the Winston Prouty staff have reached out to. He said clustering nonprofits together on the same property could foster collaboration.

“It would be great in terms of working cross-sector,” Davis said.

If the program is able to partner and use the two dormitories, it would be a way to house people instead of using emergency motel rooms, Davis said.

### ***Winston Prouty Center abandons plans to expand at its site***

The Prouty Center was looking to expand on-site, and needed to find temporary quarters during that planned project, said Dunn, but officials decided to scrap the renovation plan and consider the Austine site.

The Prouty Center is leading the conversation around the Austine campus, but, “we can’t do it by ourselves,” Learey said.

Learey said the center was one of the first preschools in the country to offer a program for children with disabilities, and is named for U.S. Sen. Winston Prouty, R-Vt., who co-sponsored the Handicapped Children’s Early Education Assistance Act of 1968.

The programs Winston Prouty offers children and families in the community and at its center have grown, said Learey, and the center was close to embarking on an expansion at its current site when it changed gears to look at Austine.

“We went back to why would we want to build a \$2 million building here if we could move there?” Learey asked. “We were set to break ground last month, and the board decided we really have to take this option seriously and look at it closely and see what’s viable.”

<http://vtdigger.org/2015/07/01/nonprofits-look-to-purchase-austine-school-campus/>