

Harrisburg School Board forced to demolish historic building

Lindsey Cook | June 30, 2023

[HARRISBURG] William Penn High School opened its doors in 1926 - but after almost a century of standing, the school board was forced to make the decision to demolish the building.

“We’re not talking about just another high school. This was considered the place”

-Corky Goldstein, Alumni



Postcard art of Italian Gardens and William Penn High School, Courtesy of Historic Harrisburg Association, photo by Joe Camut, 2023

In its glory, William Penn was a high school known for its athletics, academics and astounding architecture. After serving as a high school for 45 years, it became a vocational-technical school until the school board closed it in 2011 due to budget constraints.

When William Penn was vacated, it was not long before the building was blighted - walls covered in graffiti, windows broken, fire damage and ceilings caving in. The building that once was William Penn High School is unrecognizable.

Danielle Robinson, a Harrisburg Area School Board member, advocated for keeping the building standing. But even she could see that there was nothing to be done to save the school.

“We’ve tried everything,” Danielle said. “We toured the building, and it’s just in such decay . . . it’s in really, really bad shape.”



William Penn High School Building, present day, Joe Camut, 2023

Everyone, including alumni and the school board, wanted to fight to keep the building. Financially, it just wasn't an option.

"The estimates that we received in the fall were about \$90 million to renovate a building that size," said Dr. Marcia Stokes, Chief Financial Officer of the Harrisburg Area school district, as opposed to the \$7 million it would cost to demolish it.

Alumni don't see the former William Penn High School building as the neglected structure it has become, rather for the memories that they had as students.

Corky Goldstein, who graduated from William Penn High School and currently lives across the street from the campus, hoped that the School Board could find a way to keep the building.

"Those people I still get together with who I graduated from William Penn with . . . we still talk about William Penn and the fun we had," he says, and wonders what's another year to find a plan to keep the building after 12 years of it sitting empty.

But for Corky and thousands of William Penn High School alumni, they will have to say goodbye before the demolition begins in early August.