

City Interested in Kullerstrand Site But Closed School Process Lengthy

By Mike McKibbin / Dec. 30, 2024 / Neighborhood Gazette

Closing a public school starts what is usually a lengthy process to determine how those buildings and sites are put to other uses.

For example, Kullerstrand, New Classical Academy at Vivian and Wilmore Davis served Wheat Ridge families and were among 16 Jefferson County School District elementaries closed by the school board at the end of the 2022-23 school year.

David Netz lives near Kullerstrand and is active in the Fireside at Applewood homeowners' association. He said a public use for Kullerstrand such as an active senior or early childhood education center — with a new adjacent park — would be welcomed.

Netz also noted a potential trail could be built along with a new park, making the site more attractive and popular with residents. Still, he questions the city's serious interest in acquiring the property.

"I'm sure they probably want property tax revenue from it," Netz said. "We'd love to see the building retained and used for something like education. And we realize the city probably doesn't have the money to purchase it themselves so maybe they can partner with a charitable organization or somebody."

"Most neighbors I've spoken to are nervous about what will happen on the site," District 3 City Councilperson Korey Stites told the *Gazette*. "Everyone sees how important the soccer fields and the playground are for our community. They also see how successful the Fireside development has been up the street. It will be a matter of finding the right developer to maybe partner with the city to make a project work for our community."

City interested but no definite plans

City Parks and Recreation Director Karen O'Donnell wrote in an email to the *Gazette* that the city would like to acquire the field space around the school for a future park.

"But we don't have any plans at this point. We're in the process of updating our 10-year master plan (the Wheat Ridge Parks & Recreation Pathway). As part of the engagement process, we've asked residents if they think it's important to acquire the field space (for park usage) at both Kullerstrand and Willmore Davis. The school district agreed to give us time to obtain community feedback before making any decisions."

Netz also said whatever future use is chosen, the school site should include adequate parking for the park. Other public improvements such as street drainage pipes instead of open ditches, at least some sidewalks and adequate nighttime lighting should also be included, he added.

O'Donnell added she did not have any information on timelines, cost, potential partnerships or other details.

"Our athletic programs, specifically soccer, would be significantly impacted if we lost that site permanently," she noted.

"We would like to finish our city plan and parks and recreation master plan update so we have input from our community before the city makes a decision on that property," city spokesperson Amanda Harrison added in another email to the *Gazette*.

Both plans are expected to be completed in 2025, she noted.

If the site is sold to a developer, Netz doesn't think it's very likely to be for single-family homes.

"I think you'd see more high density" such as apartment buildings, he stated.

Surplus disposition can take a year to complete

Greg Avedikian, project manager in the school district's chief operating office, explained the process to declare a closed school like Kullerstrand surplus property and should be sold starts with a school board vote. Using demographic projections, it would then have to be designated as having no future need.

That opens the door to municipalities where that school is located. Under state law, those local entities get first choice to acquire or lease the site and building.

"We're still studying whether Kullerstrand qualifies" for surplus designation, Avedikian said in an interview with the *Gazette*. "The city is aware of where things stand, we've met with Wheat Ridge staff and elected officials and we'll keep them in the loop if things proceed."

As of April 11, 2024, seven of the district's 21 closed schools were deemed surplus. Four surplus elementaries are in communities adjacent to Wheat Ridge and under contract for sale or lease: Allendale and Thomson in Arvada and Glennon Heights and Vivian in Lakewood.

Allendale is proposed for single-family homes, Glennon Heights is to be the site of a relocated daycare and early childhood education provider and the school building would be used.

Thomson is to serve children and young adults with autism and other behavioral support needs. That current building and site would also be used.

Vivian is under contract to a developer of 30-33 single-family homes who hopes to work with Lakewood to develop a roughly three-acre park.

The municipal zoning codes in place around each school also help guide a site's future use, Avedikian noted.

"Most of them are zoned for residential like the surrounding uses and that's the case with Kullerstrand," he stated.

Residential zoning often includes schools, churches, open space and parks, Avedikian added, so any other use would require a municipal zoning change.

"Overall, we want to take these cases in a slow and deliberate manner, in a methodical and strategic way, so we're optimizing the educational space we have," he said.

It has taken the district about a year to move three schools through the process, Avedikian added. That includes public input soon after a school is designated surplus. Public meetings and online surveys are among the ways comments are gathered. Local ad hoc committees are also formed.

"We realize communities want to see these buildings repurposed for public uses, usually with park space around them," Avedikian said. "If someone thinks there's a commercial benefit, we consider that, too. It's kind of a 'right place, right time' kind of thing that helps determine how they're used. These are unique buildings in residential areas, so many commercial or business uses are unlikely. And we have to weigh the benefits to the community and the school district."