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Ithaca school district gets OK to tear down Markles Flats building

City abandons effort to block demolition

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The Ithaca City School District recently received permission from the State Education Department to disassemble the Markles Flats building on Court Street. The City plans to replace the building with basketball courts and a parking lot this spring. / FILE PHOTO



Written by
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Ithaca -- It won't be long before the Markles Flats building on Court Street is torn down and replaced with basketball courts, ball fields, and a parking lot.

The Ithaca City [School](#) District recently received permission from the State Education Department to take the building down, board president Rob Ainslie said. After it is taken down, probably in the spring, the site will be cleaned up of toxic waste in the summer.

"After that is all complete, we can finally return that block to a useful purpose," he said. "Playing fields, some basketball courts and some parking are what we have planned for that site."

In March, a state appeals court ruled that the district has control over what to do with the Markles Flats building. Backing a Tompkins County Supreme Court judge's decision from April, state Supreme Court Appellate Division

for the Third Judicial Department ruled the Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission has no jurisdiction over school district buildings.

The Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission voted in the fall of 2009 to deny a request from the school district to demolish its historically designated Markles Flats building. The district appealed the request in Tompkins County Supreme Court and the judge ruled in the district's favor. Ainslie said the building is sitting on toxic waste and must be removed to complete the cleanup.

The city decided not to appeal the latest ruling, city attorney Dan Hoffman said. The city filed a notice of appeal in the spring, he said, but then decided not to appeal.

"The notice is a simple step and it preserves someone's right to bring a full appeal," he said. "But there was discussion with the mayor and Common Council and their decision was not to proceed with the appeal."

Hoffman said he could not elaborate on why that decision was made. A call to Mayor Carolyn Peterson was not returned.

The district is now ready to proceed with the next steps.

"It is time to take the fences down and get that block in use again," Ainslie said. "This has been ongoing for a long time and it is time to have that area be used by students and the community."

The district plans on putting two basketball courts, a soccer field, baseball field, and softball field on the property, along with some room for parking, Ainslie said. The district, which acquired the building in the 1960s and once housed what became Lehman Alternative Community School there, is working with the Greater Ithaca Activities Center and district personnel in the physical education department to figure out a layout for the playing fields, he said.

The land will include plenty of green space as well, he said. Students at Beverly J. Martin Elementary School will be the most direct beneficiaries, he said. But the wider community, including GIAC, will also have access to the facilities.

"What we are not going to do is build any buildings there for awhile," he said. "We want to let the site settle for a bit."

The district is more than willing to save parts of the building that people are interested in, Ainslie said. The board has seen a few plans for the site and will make those available to the general public at a meeting in the future, he said.

New York State Electric & Gas Corp., as the successor to the company that made fuel gas from coal tar on the site, will be financially responsible for the cleanup and the construction that will follow, Ainslie said. The Department of Environmental Conservation and the state Department of Health will oversee the cleanup process, he said.

For environmental advocate Walter Hang, president of Toxic Targeting in Ithaca, the fact that the cleanup process is finally in the works is good news. There are huge amounts of cancer-causing coal tar on the site, he said, and it must be removed.

"This is a tremendous victory for comprehensive cleanup of contamination problems in Ithaca and I am just so grateful that the school district stuck to their guns and finally gained a resolution of this problem," he said. "I hope that this will result in the contamination being removed once and for all so that that site can be fully cleaned up and the adjoining homes and schools can be safe guarded."