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## Future of county school campuses unclear

By Alex Holloway • March 23, 2019 • 4 mins to read



West Oktibbeha High School, in Maben, sits vacant. The campus is one of three Oktibbeha County is considering acquiring from the Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District. Photo by: Alex Holloway/Dispatch Staff

Nearly a week after supervisors voted to have Board Attorney Rob Roberson draft a contract for the potential acquisition of three former Oktibbeha County School District campuses, it remains unclear what such an arrangement might look like.

Supervisors voted 3-2, with District 1's John Montgomery and District 4's Bricklee Miller opposed, to have Roberson draft the contract. Board President Orlando Trainer offered the motion and picked up support from District 3's Marvell Howard and District 5's Joe Williams.

The county is eyeing the acquisition of East Oktibbeha Elementary School, East Oktibbeha High School and West Oktibbeha High School. The high schools are vacant, though the Education Association of East Oktibbeha County Schools sometimes hosts events at East High School.

East Elementary currently houses the Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District's Alternative Education Programs.



Roberson, who also represents District 43 in the Mississippi House of Representatives, said he has been in Jackson much of the week and hasn't had a chance to initiate discussions with the school district but plans to contact them soon. He said the district has, in all conversations prior to the vote, been willing to work with the county.

"My understanding is I'm supposed to contact them and find out what this would look like — how we would respond, what would be required in the future and what would be required now," Roberson said. "I don't know if we call ourselves buying it, or taking it over to keep it up. At this point, I need to have a meeting of the minds with their attorney to find out what it is they need and what they're requesting of us."

Roberson said he doesn't take Monday's vote as a sign that the county will definitively acquire the buildings.

"It may mean that they just intend on me taking a look at it a little bit," he said. "I don't think anybody has the intent to move full-blown with this yet. This is getting us to look at it and the contract would fill in the blanks."

### **Using the buildings**

After Monday's meeting, Trainer said he didn't want to get "too specific" about possible uses for the building.

"The sky's the limit," Trainer said. "And we don't have to get into any specifics right now because one thing about getting too specific — those plans can change. But I think once the county has acquired those buildings, then anything the county deems worthy or necessary can go on there. But it's obvious we're going to need a partner, so I can envision public and private partnerships that can really help us to utilize those buildings."

Trainer has long called for the county to make use of the vacant school campuses. In May 2016, he said they were "too great of public assets to just sit there dormant."

SOCSD Superintendent Eddie Peasant said the district would like to see the campuses used, possibly for community-based services.



Peasant added the district's focus in conversations with the county has, to this point, focused on swapping property with the county.

### Administrative building

The county was in negotiations to purchase the former Mississippi Department of Health Building on Lynn Lane and trade it for the three campuses. In August, the county offered \$1.7 million for the building, which is now owned by CMMG Enterprises. That request was denied, as the building's owner has requested at least \$1.9 million.

If the purchase had gone through, the county would have given the building to the school district to use as an administrative office. SOCSD's administration is currently split between the Greensboro Center, a county building on Main Street that also houses county emergency management, and Henderson Ward-Stewart Elementary School.

While the discussions have so far focused on a swap, Roberson said there have been preliminary discussions of the district giving the county the buildings in exchange for future help in constructing or purchasing an administrative office.

Peasant said the district is open to possibly continuing those discussions.

"The discussion of building an administration building has just surfaced because of the inability to come to an agreement on the existing building we looked at," Peasant said. "Obviously for us, it's about just getting some additional space for our central offices."

*Alex Holloway was formerly a reporter with The Dispatch.*

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