

Second Act for Old Davenport School of the Arts Campus

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The old Davenport School of the Arts campus that has sat mostly empty for four years has some new guests.

The Polk County School Board has lent the space on Palmetto Street in the city's downtown historic district at no cost to TheatreWorks Florida. The company receives a National Endowment for the Arts grant for its new TheatreCares program.

Scott Cook, TheatreWorks Florida's artistic producer, approached the School Board when the program needed somewhere to rehearse for its inaugural show. He says using the space has reignited a conversation about the building's future.

"We've had several tours (of city officials) coming through to see our setup in the rehearsal studio — getting people to open their eyes and think, 'Wow. This is right in our neighborhood and we haven't been doing anything with it,'" Cook said.

The Davenport School of the Arts left the campus in January 2011 for its modern facility on County Road 547, north of town.

The main building was built in 1927, but the campus includes newer additions, including what was a music building, a kindergarten building and a cafeteria.

The Ridge Career Center has since moved into eight of the modern classrooms, operating Fresh Start, ESOL, GED and adult education programs. The campus even bears a new name: Davenport Career Education Center.

But only a small portion of the campus is in use, and the original building is vacant.

"I don't use the old building and don't really have any plans to," said John Small, the Polk County School District's assistant superintendent of career, technical, adult and multiple pathways education.

Harriett Rust, the founder of the Davenport Creative Arts and Culture Alliance and founding member of the Davenport Historical Society, said the old building is falling into more disrepair as the city waits for the School Board to do something with it.

"There's an auditorium that could lend itself to theatrical productions, we could have a media center in conjunction with the Fresh Start program or even another school," Rust said.

The latter, however, isn't cost efficient, according to Greg Rivers, the district's



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Steven Maynard, from left, Scott Cook and Abel Gonzales prepare to load props onto a truck at the old Davenport School of the Arts on Friday.

associate superintendent of operations.

He said that it would cost \$8.5 million to renovate the campus, and it would only give the county space for 600 students.

Now, the School Board plans to spend about \$60 million to build two new schools near Davenport, a K-8 school to accommodate 1,400 students and another elementary school.

As for the old Davenport School of the Arts, "I don't think it will get any use in the near future unless there's some crazy enrollment or someone who comes up with the money to expand adult vocational programs into the other buildings," Small said.

The City Commission organized a school task force committee, made up of residents, in October to develop ideas for potential uses for the campus. The committee has only met once, and plans to meet again in January.

Abel Gonzales, TheatreWorks Florida's company manager, is a member on the committee.

"The goal for us is that if the School Board makes no new development in the case of the old school, we want to see if the city can utilize the space for the arts," Gonzales said. "Our biggest driving force is the cultural alliance, which wants to bring more arts to the area."

TheatreCares began rehearsals at the old school in October and is now using the space for storage for props and costumes.

Cook said the campus has a dance studio, a black box theater and an amphitheater that seats up to 180 people.

"It just stops my heart to see this space just sitting there," Cook said. "The city and its community of art lovers have had eyes on its potential to serve as an arts complex in the future, as well as give TheatreWorks Florida a permanent home."

"We're hoping the theater program is a foot in the door," Rust said. "But we're not certain — and the School Board doesn't seem to be either."

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