

Is the closed St. Anthony an answer to Fitchburg's preschool prayer?

Sentinel & Enterprise
Sentinel & Enterprise

Updated: 2017-07-26 04:59:25.208536

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FITCHBURG -- The doors at Saint Anthony School will remain closed this fall semester for the first time in over 60 years, however the building may not be empty for long.

Fitchburg Schools Superintendent Andre Ravenelle said the public school district is "exploring" the possibility of moving its seven preschool classrooms into the roughly 19,000-square-foot building on 123 Salem St.

"It's in the early stages of conversation right now," Ravenelle said.

The building is currently owned by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Worcester, which ran the school for 66 years until this June, according to records from the city assessor.

Pastor Juan Ramirez of the St. Anthony of Padua Church in Fitchburg, part of the Worcester diocese, said his predecessor, Pastor Leo-Paul LeBlanc, met with public school officials for a tour earlier this summer.

Ramirez, who assumed his post about a week ago, said he had not yet attended a parish finance committee meeting and could not yet comment on the proposal.

The idea of moving some public school classrooms into the building comes after two years of rising district enrollment, Ravenelle said.

"I've been having to squeeze out classroom space especially at the elementary school in any way possible," he said.

Two years ago enrollment increased by about 140 students and last year enrollment increased by 111, he said. In total 5,192 students were enrolled in the district, according to the 2016 district report card.

Ravenelle said he is waiting until mid-August, when enrollment numbers are more final, to see if this trend continues.

"I want to see (if) this is a pattern or a blip?" he said.

If it's a pattern, it may be worthwhile to move the district's seven preschool classrooms along with several existing teachers and administrators into the building, Ravenelle said.

The plan would keep the same staffing levels, but would increase district facility costs. The sum of this increase and possible cost of buying or leasing the building was not determined during the preliminary discussions, according to Ravenelle.

The building, constructed in 1951, has seven classrooms, several offices and a small cafeteria. Ravenelle said the structure is in good condition with a recently replaced roof and relatively new boiler.

"It's been very well maintained," Ravenelle said.

Keeping the Saint Anthony building occupied could also help the neighborhood, he said.

"I have the mentality that we're not just an isolated school," he said. "We could be an active part of that neighborhood."

Last year, the district had 120 preschool students who attended the half-day program.

Even if the plan moves forward, Ravenelle said he does not expect to occupy the building this school year.

The only former school the city owns is B.F. Brown School, which was heavily damaged in a fire last September, he said. Otherwise, Ravenelle said none of the city-owned buildings can be turned into a school.

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