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## A plan to 'rejuvenate' Black Field

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### Flat River Community Library expresses interest in obtaining Black Field

*By Cory Smith*

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Located at 200 W. Judd St., the Flat River Community Library, pictured top right, sits to the immediate northeast of historic Black Field, which Greenville Public School owns. As the GPS Board of Education looks to part itself with the property, the library's board has expressed a desire that the school district donate the property to the library. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

GREENVILLE — As district leaders at Greenville Public Schools continue to finalize the means of placing historic Black Field on the market, one community organization has already stepped forward to indicate its interest in the property.

During the March 11 meeting of the Board of Education, Flat River Community Library Director Stefanie Reed approached the board during public comment, expressing the library's interest in obtaining the property since Superintendent Wayne Roedel first mentioned a desire to sell in August 2023, citing liability issues.

The 108-year-old football field, located directly south of the library between W. High and W. Judd streets, saw its first varsity football game played upon it in 1915.

Black Field hosted its last such game in the fall of 2011, as entering the 2012 varsity football season, Greenville Public Schools celebrated the opening of Legacy Field — a new \$6.5 million football stadium with artificial turf founded through a \$14.57 million bond proposal approved by voters in 2011.

Since that time, the property has sat essentially unchanged, only used occasionally for the youth Rocket Football program and various soccer programs in the mid-2010s.

The field has now sat vacant for several years as those programs have turned to utilizing the school district's more modern facilities.

Roedel said while he understands and appreciates the historical and cultural significance of Black Field, it comes at an annual price tag of \$20,000 for maintenance and liability insurance. The property is not currently included in any of the district's long-term plans for facilities.

As a result, the board will soon be entertaining requests for proposals, and could decide to sell or donate the property.

While the board won't vote on the RFP language until its next meeting on Monday, Reed informed the board that the library is very much interested in obtaining the property.

'Our goal is to rejuvenate Black Field'



Flat River Community Library Director Stefanie Reed presents a proposal to the Greenville Public Schools Board of Education during its meeting on March 11, in which she asked that the board donate the historic Black

For 109 years, the site where the library currently resides was previously the source of education in the community.

Field property to the library, to be used as an outdoor venue for events and concerts. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

In 1868, the three-story Union School was constructed on the site, where it educated students until the structure was destroyed in a fire in 1911.



Constructed in 1998 on the site of the former Central School building that was demolished in 1977, the Flat River Community Library is located to the immediate northeast of historic Black Field, which Greenville Public School owns. As the GPS Board of Education looks to part itself with the property, the library's board has expressed a desire that the school district donate the property to the library. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

Central School was then constructed on the same site in 1912.

Shortly after the construction of Central School, Dr. Duncan K. Black donated property adjacent to the school — what became known as Black Field.

After Central School was demolished in 1977, the property sat vacant for 21 years until the \$3.4 million, 23,000-square-foot library was constructed on the site.

As the 2.2-acre property was originally donated to the library by Greenville Public Schools, Reed and the Library Board are holding out hope the school district will be willing to donate property to the library a second time.

“We see the potential donation of Black Field to the library as a natural progression of our shared history and mutual support,” Reed said. “It would be a great way to bookend this project by reuniting these properties to benefit the community. Our vision for Black Field is ambitious but attainable. We aim to lightly transform the space into a flexible, outdoor program and event venue, capable of hosting enriching and fun library events for a growing number of attendees.”

According to Reed, the library's indoor event space regularly hits capacity in the summer months and outdoor events on the property have seen up to 1,000 attendees at a time.

“The need for more space is definitely there,” she said. “We can also make the venue available for other organizations, for outdoor events and concerns. Additionally, we'd like to landscape and reconfigure the surrounding property to include accessible parking and a natural play and rest space, equipped with WiFi, to create a welcoming, outdoor recreational environment for families.

“Of course, before any steps would be taken, we would engage with our patrons and the wider community to gather feedback and ensure that the revitalization of Black Field aligns with the desires and needs of those we serve,” she said. “This collaborative approach would guarantee that the future of the property not only meets, but exceeds community expectations, creating a lasting legacy of beauty and value for Greenville.”

Reed added that the Library Board voted in December to move forward with an effort to acquire Black Field and is prepared to take over ownership, should the school district move in that direction.

“We've thoroughly reviewed the operational and capital funding necessary for this project and we are confident in our ability to manage the property's future,” she said. “Our goal is to rejuvenate Black Field, transforming it into a valuable community asset that offers beauty and engagement opportunities for all residents while honoring its storied history.”

“In entrusting the Flat River Community Library with Black Field, you would be placing this historic property into safe, caring and financially stable hands, ensuring its preservation and continued contribution to our community, well into the future,” she continued. “Together we can ensure Black Field serves as a beacon of community engagement, learning and enjoying for years to come.”

‘Something the community can use’

While members of the board did not comment on the library's proposal directly, Roedel did ask for feedback concerning language for the RFP.

“At our finance committee meeting, my understanding going into that meeting around Black Field was there was some concern that the property, whoever it goes to, kind of maintains whatever the use might be of any organization that would put in a proposal that the board might accept,” he said.

Roedel said he desired to have the board direct him as to how long it may want to place restrictions on the deed for the property, in terms of the property's usage.

“Do we want a 10-year deed restriction, where it would maintain its use per the proposal? 20 years? 100 years?” he asked.

Members of the board reached a consensus that 20 years would be appropriate.



Greenville Superintendent Wayne Roedel, left, provides an update during the March 11 meeting of the Board of Education regarding the eventual drafting of a request for proposal about the potential sale or donation of the school district's Black Field property as Trustee Brian Gardner listens. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

"I think it should be longer than 10 years, probably 20, because I do think it's imperative that we agree that this is something the community can use," Trustee Richelle Lentz said. "I think it's important that we honor that. I think 20 years makes it so whoever is coming in here, that they have a plan with longevity to do that for our community."

Trustee Brian Gardner asked Roedel if he was previously aware of the library's proposal.

Roedel said while he had been in communication with Reed and members of the library board, answering questions about the Black Field property, Reed's comments were the first time he had heard a formal proposal.

"Like other groups, I've heard there are multiple groups that are interested in what they might do with the property," he said. "I will tell you, Steph and the Library Board have asked lots of questions. They've expressed pretty strong interest."

Lentz clarified that in terms of accepting RFPs in the future, the board is not bound to accept a potential highest bid for the property, meaning a donation of the property would be possible.

"The way the RFP will be written does allow us flexibility," she said. "We can make a choice based on what we think is best, it doesn't have to be the highest bid."

Roedel reiterated that reality.

"I want to be clear right out of the gate — you don't have to accept any of them," he said. "It's not based on the financial piece. It's really based on the board and what you think the best use is for Greenville and the community is moving forward."

Lastly, Board President Kire Wierda asked if right for first refusal could also be incorporated into the potential sale or donation of the property, to ensure the school district could re-obtain the property in the event it were to be offered for sale in the future.

"If that's something the board would like in the proposal, we can do that," Roedel said.

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