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## No decision yet on Barr Street facility

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Jan 19, 2023

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Hope on the Hill's future continues to hang in the balance, as it waits for a new lease agreement with Lancaster County School District.

Hope on the Hill operates out of the Lancaster County School District's Barr Street facility, and has been doing so since 2005, even though its lease agreement expired in 2006.

The future usage of the Barr Street facility has been pushed for four months after first appearing on the Lancaster County School Board's Oct. 25, 2022, agenda. It was on the November, December and January agendas, but no action was taken on it.

The nonprofit Hope on the Hill was started in 2002 and is run by the Rev. Wayne Murray, its executive director. The organization primarily serves the city's Black community, offering facilities for before and after school, summer activities and sports teams.

Lancaster County School Board Vice Chair Melvin Stroble said he brought up the concern last fall about the program running out of a district-owned building with an expired lease for liability reasons.

“The school district cannot have an agreement of folks operating a building, without an agreement in place. We’re working to correct that,” he said.

USC Lancaster associate professor Suzanne Penuel praised Hope on the Hill during citizens comments at the Tuesday, Jan. 17, school board meeting.

“I’ve seen how Hope on the Hill manages that space over the years, and they’ve done a great job with no taxpayer money,” she said. “I was just there for the MLK event this past Saturday and the improvements the organization has made are impressive.”

She said the Barr Street facility remains one of the only accessible and equitable spaces left in the county for organizations to use. Other local facilities can cost several thousand dollars per event, according to Stroble. Murray said Hope on the Hill charges \$600 for the entire day.

“Hope on the Hill is just in a better position than the school district is to make the most advantageous use of this space,” Penuel said. “As you can see, it has a really unusual amount of community buy-in; the past several meetings have been a testament to that, which would be tough to replicate under any kind of different administrative structure. It’s a real asset to this entire county.”

The ongoing lease issue could impact Hope on the Hill’s grant funding.

“We’re looking at the agreement to find, potentially, a new agreement,” Stroble said. “I’m unaware of any impact to Hope on the Hill operations.”

But Hope on the Hill board member Keith Grey Sr. said the impending decision is affecting its partnership with Promise Neighborhood, which works with Clinton Elementary to support educational success.

“Promise Neighborhood can’t commit to anything with us unless they know for sure that we’re going to be there,” Grey said. “They’ve got a huge grant, and they’re looking at Hope on the Hill being one of the anchors of the whole Promise Neighborhood activity.”

Murray said that current and future grants would be affected by the looming decision, because grants require at least a five-year lease.

According to Murray, the school board offered a three-year lease extension, but Hope on the Hill rejected the offer as it would not allow its grants to continue. Murray said he asked for seven years, because it would meet the grant requirement, and is “God’s perfect number.”

Stroble said the community concern seems to be coming from a place of misunderstanding.

“I think with leaders in the community, there’s a misunderstanding of what my personal line of questioning and objectives are, not the board’s,” he said. “At no point in time have I asked questions specific about Hope on the Hill programs or the effectiveness of that program. But what I have asked for is the list of programs that they sponsor, that they host, so that we can ensure space is available to continue those programs. And I haven’t been given an answer.”

Murray said he is confused by that, because his organization has done everything the school district has asked them to do, with the understanding that the lease would be ongoing.

“We carry our insurance,” he said. “We operate the facility according to the contract that we had at that time. The utilities, the insurance, the security system — everything is in our name. We have abided by everything that the school district has asked us to do.

“We did the improvement with the understanding that it would be an ongoing lease that we had with the school district, so we are still waiting for the school district to make up their mind what it is going to do.”

Murray said he hopes the school district will come up with a decision as to what it’s going to do, because there are some more pressing issues within the Black community, besides Hope on the Hill.

“I know that folks are wanting to get this behind us (speaking personally, not as a board member), and I agree,” Stroble said. “But I want to be fair to the community and to Hope on the Hill. And I think any rushed decision would not yield a result that is a win-win for all parties.”

Stroble said there is no timeline for a decision to be made, and that conversations between Hope on the Hill and the board are happening to determine Barr Street usage.

Murray said he has no idea who those conversations are with, because he has not been contacted.

“The last conversation I had was with the chairman of the board, Brad Small, before Christmas,” Murray said. “We held a community meeting, in which I was told that the school board had four proposals for us. I went to the chairman of the board and he told me he didn’t know anything about them.”

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