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Contact: Robyn Anderson
Historic Augusta, Inc.
706-724-0436
robyn@historicaugusta.org

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DEMOLITION OF OLD DAVIDSON SCHOOL SIGNIFICANT LOSS FOR AUGUSTA AND TAXPAYERS

Historic Augusta laments the demolition of Old Davidson School, 1102 Telfair Street, Augusta, Georgia. This important building was a contributing structure in the National Register's Augusta Downtown Historic District and its loss amounts to demolition by neglect. It is our understanding that plans have been in the works for at least a year to build a new structure on the same site to house Davidson Fine Arts Academy for a K-8 school.

The Old Davidson School was named by Historic Augusta to its inaugural Endangered Properties List for 2007 and over the years efforts have been made to direct qualified buyers to the school board. But the organization received little encouragement and no serious cooperation to find a buyer. Over the past 18 years of vacancy, no maintenance was done to the building other than erecting a fence, and boarding up the windows after several years of abandonment. This demolition by neglect on the part of the Board of Education allowed the condition of the building to eventually decline to its present deplorable state of repair with the roof caving in, flooring rotted and beams falling through two stories.

Even so, the handsome property, well located between Augusta's resurgent central business district and its huge downtown medical complex, was an excellent prospect for redevelopment with its solid masonry walls. Nationwide, historic schools have been reused for many purposes including apartments, condominiums, office space, medical facilities and even charter schools. Furthermore, if the building had been sold, qualified rehabilitation would have provided the buyer substantial historic tax credits and other benefits that could have cut rehab costs by as much as half.

Old Davidson School served as the original location of the Davidson Fine Arts Magnet School, which became the outstanding public high school in the state of Georgia. It was built in 1934 as an elementary school in the Art Deco style using materials and craftsmanship that simply do not exist today. Its loss is an architectural, as well as financial, tragedy for Augusta.

As recently as March of this year, Historic Augusta visited the historic school with a local developer who had an interest in buying the building. That developer has a record of successful rehabs in our city. Historic Augusta and the developer were accompanied by staff members of the Georgia Historic Preservation Division who were shocked at the deplorable condition of the building. Nevertheless they agreed that a qualified rehabilitation could be certified for state and federal tax credit programs. The developer subsequently made a formal offer to purchase the building for the purpose of redeveloping it for residential apartments but the Board of Education never responded. Now we learn that a new plan has been in the works, yet this was never shared with interested parties in the community.

Development of a new school with the potential to enhance the long established and much acclaimed Davidson Fine Arts Magnet School for primary grades is a laudable goal. But this could have been accomplished by rehabbing the existing structure, as has been done so well with other historic school buildings in Richmond County, and throughout the country.

According to current city tax records the total assessed value of the property is \$779,995. Of that total value, the vacant land is worth only \$144,620. \$240,000 will be spent to demolish the building, leaving the property with a negative value since the building is being removed. This destruction of \$635,375 in value of the historic building is not a wise use of taxpayer funds. Had the building been minimally maintained after it was decommissioned in 1997, it could have served the same purpose. Had a buyer been diligently sought, this significant financial loss could have been avoided. Further, had the 72,000 square foot building been sold to a private entity, the value of the renovated property could have been added to the tax rolls of the City of Augusta.

For more information, call Historic Augusta at 706-724-0436.