

# Bon Secours plans to tear down Westhampton site for medical office building, abandons nursing school plans

By KATIE DEMERIA Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Wednesday, December 14, 2016 10:35 pm

Bon Secours Richmond Health System has abandoned its plan to save the Westhampton School building at Patterson and Libbie avenues in Richmond's West End.

The health system said Wednesday that as the cost of the project continued to increase, it decided instead to move its Memorial College of Nursing to the Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical Center campus in Hanover County. Originally, the college had planned to occupy the vacant school building.

"We couldn't get (the project) down much under \$43 million, whereas if you built a college of nursing freestanding on green space, it would cost \$15 million," said Toni Ardabell, CEO of Bon Secours Virginia Health System and of Bon Secours Richmond Health System.

The health system now wants to build a \$20 million, two-story medical office building on the Westhampton School site. Saving the original school building would not be feasible, officials concluded.

The plans for a medical office building and relocation of the nursing college have yet to go through Bon Secours' internal approval process, Ardabell said.

And the new plan for the 4-acre Westhampton School site will require multiple layers of city approval before it can advance. The health system expects to file the necessary paperwork to start the process in the next couple of months.

But the plans to demolish the building received mixed reactions from city officials, neighborhood business owners and others.

Cyane Crump, executive director of the nonprofit preservation group Historic Richmond, said the organization is "terribly disappointed to learn that Bon Secours intends to demolish the historic Westhampton School."

\*\*\*

**Bon Secours** took over the school property three years ago as part of a larger agreement it made with the city of Richmond, which included a 60-year lease of the Westhampton property and two 20-year renewal



IMG\_2055

Bon Secours Richmond Health System wants to demolish the Westhampton School building at Patterson and Libbie avenues in Richmond's West End. The vacant school has two buildings — one constructed in 1917 and the other in 1935. The building had housed Richmond Community High School from 1990 to 2009.

options.

The lease was part of a \$6.4 million sponsorship deal in which the health system agreed to invest in the Washington Redskins training camp in exchange for control of the Westhampton property and to expand services in the city's East End. That deal was made under Ardabell's predecessor, Peter Bernard.

The health system said it remains committed to its rental agreement with the city and to Richmond Public Schools, to which it pays \$100,000 a year for the 10-year agreement. To date, it has paid \$300,000 to the schools and \$30,000 annually to the city to maintain the public playing field next to the property.

In its original performance agreement with the city, Bon Secours had suggested constructing a 50,000-square-foot medical office building on the Westhampton site, which likely would house primary care, including behavioral health, services.

"We're back to thinking that's the right thing to do, without the school being there," Ardabell said. "That actually creates more jobs, which the city's very interested in."

\*\*\*

**The health system** started the process Wednesday when it requested and won a year extension in its development contract with the city's Economic Development Authority, which is leasing the property as part of Bon Secours' larger economic development deal surrounding the training camp.

Bon Secours has already received two extensions from the authority. Wednesday's action pushes back the deadline for Bon Secours to win zoning approval for its plans from the city from March 2017 to March 2018.

Lee Downey, the city's economic development chief, said Mayor Dwight C. Jones' administration supported giving Bon Secours additional time, but is reserving judgment on the plans themselves.

"What they asked for was a time extension to look at new plans," Downey said. "They did talk about the possibility of tearing the school down, and I made it very clear when they said that that the city supports the extension of time to work with the community and the other people to move plans forward. They're going to have to go through their zoning issues; they're going to have to go through community planning."

Julious P. Smith Jr., the authority's chairman who is an attorney with the Williams Mullen law firm, concurred: "Basically we feel like if they need time to get the project together, we feel it is the right thing to do." Regarding the possibility of demolishing the building, he said: "That's going to be all part of the process they'll have to go through with the city and neighbors."

\*\*\*

**Bon Secours tried** to keep and renovate the Westhampton School building as part of its plans for the nursing college, according to Ardabell. It brought in two architecture firms and a third-party consultant to determine if the cost of the project could be reduced, but to no avail.

"It just got to the point where ... there was just no way we thought that was a sound business decision," she said. "When we make business decisions about new projects we have to realize that consumers aren't going

to pay more for health care because we make bad business decisions.”

In August, Bon Secours held a community meeting at its St. Mary’s Hospital campus — located less than a mile off Libbie Avenue from the school site — updating neighbors on its plans for the building.

Those plans had included connecting the school’s two buildings — one constructed in 1917 and the other in 1935 — as well as adding a 25,000-square-foot addition, all while mostly retaining the school’s exterior along Patterson Avenue.

The building had housed Richmond Community High School from 1990 to 2009, when the alternative school for academically gifted students moved. The building has been vacant since.

The project for Bon Secours to take over the building had been appealing initially because it made sense to put a school — the college of nursing — within a former school building, Ardabell explained. But the building’s age and floor plan made that unrealistic.

“We tried to save the school,” said Robert J. Clark, president of Richmond-based Baskervill, one of the architecture firms that Bon Secours worked with. “The space ... is not suitable for modern health care.”

\*\*\*

**Leigh Johnson**, a co-owner of The Shops at 5807, which is across Patterson Avenue from the Westhampton School property, said she is very interested in better understanding the health system’s plans for the site.

“Bon Secours has been wonderful neighbors to us,” Johnson said. She and her sister, Anne Brasfield, own the mini mall of unusual small shops that they opened at 5807 Patterson Ave. in 2006.

“And I’m sure whatever they do will be tasteful and they will keep the neighborhood in mind and will continue to develop the ... Patterson Avenue corridor.”

But others reacted with concern over the loss of the historic buildings.

“We were surprised by this news and are studying the situation,” Historic Richmond’s Crump said.

Kimberly Gray, the incoming 2nd District City Council representative who as a School Board member criticized the Westhampton building deal, called the demolition news “very, very disappointing.”

“That school building has been a part of the fabric of that neighborhood, and it’s sort of an anchor,” said Gray, who argued at the time of the deal that the school system was being shortchanged. The city code required that revenue from the sale of old school buildings go back to the schools for new projects, but the language didn’t extend to leases.

Gray said she would need to see more details before deciding whether she would vote to approve the demolition.

“And I’d need to hear from the communities that are most profoundly impacted,” Gray said.