

## Next chapter coming for old Draper School

Developer set to begin \$12.5M conversion into apartments

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Jesse Holland, president of Sunrise Management & Consulting, poses outside the former Draper School in Rotterdam on Wednesday, June 1, 2016. Sunrise will be redeveloping the old school into apartments. (John Copley/Gazette Business Editor)

The long-suffering former Draper School has started a new chapter in a new life.

Final town approvals have been secured, financing is in place and interior cleanup has begun as a developer embarks on a \$12.5 million conversion of the 125,000-square-foot building into more than 100 apartments.

The sprawling schoolhouse was built in stages starting in 1913. With the last addition in 1951, the building and its parking lots occupied the entire block bounded by Draper and Vischer avenues and Earl and Stanton streets. It is by far the largest building in the area, and in its current condition, stands out in especially stark contrast to the neatly kept houses around it.

Jesse Holland, president of Sunrise Management and Consulting in Albany, is taking the lead on the project. Sunrise Capital Partners is majority owner of Draper Lofts LLC, which is in the process of closing on purchase of the building from the Duanesburg businessman who bought it at auction in 2013.

After an extensive planning process, financing and regulatory approvals are all in place, and 20 Dumpsters full of debris have already been hauled away.

“We’re pulling all the pieces together,” Holland said.

The Draper Lofts project is a major undertaking complicated by some vandalism and water damage, and by the fact that the building was built in stages over a several decades, shut down as a school, partly converted for rental to various small businesses, then partly reconfigured again for a now-defunct charter school.

For that reason, the exact blueprint of the apartments — studios, one- and two-bedroom units that will rent for \$800 to \$1,800 — is not finalized, even at this late point.

“As you start to tear things apart, things have to change a little bit,” Holland explained, comparing the old school to a jigsaw puzzle.

The nooks and crannies of an old school — a cloakroom here, a rest room where one seems unlikely to be — are not the liability they might seem.

“The beauty of these types of apartments is they’re not all the same,” Holland said. “We try and take advantage of those things.”

The plan now is to build 113 units totaling 97,000 square feet. The rest of the space is unusable or will be common areas such as hallways.

Making the project considerably easier is the fact that it’s a solid building and that Sunrise just completed a very similar overhaul of a schoolhouse of similar vintage in Averill Park — creating the Homeroom Lofts apartments. That project provided a lot of lessons that will be applied at Draper.

Architect Bob Bucher of Design Logic Architects created the plans for both.

Holland said small changes will have to be made as the work continues over the next 18 to 24 months, but there should be no big surprises.

“Because the building is somewhat of a shell, there’s not a lot that can pop out at you. I guess my biggest surprise was how ingrained in the community it was,” he said. “When you get into an old school like this, the whole community went there, it’s their history. You have to respect that.”

#### Fond memories

For that reason, Sunrise has invited the community to a ground-breaking ceremony at 11 a.m. June 17 and, from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., the Draper Memory Lane Stroll — a last chance to walk through the building in its incarnation as a school. The price of admission is a donation to the Mohonasen Foundation for Excellence, which raises money and provides resources to improve educational opportunities in the Mohonasen Central School District, which absorbed the old Draper School District 30 years ago.

John Gahan, a member of the foundation, said the group will be selling artifacts from the original school — numbered doors, alarm boxes, seat backs from the auditorium, wood from the gym bleachers — at the June 17 event to raise funds for its mission. Everyone who participates will also get a swatch of the auditorium curtain.

“Jesse reached out to us on this,” he said, explaining how the event came to pass. (Holland grew up downstate but has his own connection — his wife is a Mohonasen librarian.)

On Wednesday morning, Holland walked members of the Mohonasen Foundation through the building to claim items for the fundraiser, and invited some former Draper students and teachers along as well.

There were many fond memories shared and even a few tears shed as the group walked through.

Kim Thomas and Kim Palmerino, both 1984 Draper grads who now live in Schenectady, were among those walking the halls.

“It was very moving,” Thomas said afterward. “Everything just came flooding back.”

Palmerino said: “Kindergarten still smells like crayons and paste.”

She explained a key reason for the school’s outsized place in the collective memory of that part of Rotterdam: It was the only school in the district. So students went there from kindergarten through 12th grade, and then a decade or two later, their own children might spend 13 years there.

Palmerino recalled that during free periods as an older student, she would visit the teachers from her earlier grades and help them grade papers.

“Even when we were in high school, we still saw the little kids,” she said.

Many parts of the Draper experience, Thomas noted, tended to connect the school to the community — everything from there being no school buses (all the kids walked to school) to the proms being held right in the gym.

Doug Jones, a Draper health and physical education teacher from 1973 to 1986, had similar recollections Wednesday. “It was like a family,” he said. “This was the center of the community for a long time.”

He noted that the family got smaller and smaller toward the end. The senior class numbered in the 90s in the first year he was there and only 65 the last year. Despite this, and predictably, there was local opposition to the merger that eliminated Draper as its own district. (The name lives on a couple of miles away at Mohonasen’s Draper Middle School.)

Tom Yuille, another retired teacher taking the tour Wednesday, has what must be one of the longest runs ever at Draper — he started kindergarten there in 1950, went through all 12 grades, then came back as a shop teacher and summer custodian from 1970 to 1985. And he's now a member of the Rotterdam Planning Commission, and helped review the plans for rebirth of the old school.

Yuille said this project is far more than he and his former shop students could undertake with tool belts strapped on — “It's a major construction project now.”

He added: “It'll be nice to see life come back to this building.”

#### A work in progress

From the outside, the old Draper School is a bit shabby in some places, a lot shabby in others. Inside, it's a hodgepodge of decay, vandalism, initial demolition for the loft project, and remnants of past endeavors.

The hint of paste and crayons Palmerino smelled upstairs is obscured by dust and mold downstairs. Old fluorescent tubes are neatly stacked up awaiting proper disposal. Obsolete computer monitors cluster in the shadows like driftwood. Wooden floorboards are heaved up in places. Windows are boarded or broken, and weeds grow through the “1928” on the roofline.

After Draper was closed as a school, it was sold and the rooms rented for offices and various other uses. In 2006, the International Charter School of Schenectady purchased and extensively renovated the building, then moved in.

ICSS ceased operation in 2008 and the building went vacant — and improperly secured, allowing vandals inside to smash drywall and glass. A roof drainpipe backed up, sending water into the lowest level. Pipes were cut out and stolen. A fire charred a small area of the basement.

Through neglect and intentionally inflicted damage, Draper quickly became a mess.

Because the ICSS had never applied for the property tax exemption it was entitled to as a non-profit, and was not able to pay the resulting tax bills, Schenectady County eventually seized the building for unpaid taxes.

Ray Gillen, commissioner of economic development for the county and chairman of the Schenectady County Metroplex Development Authority, said the county was able to halt the vandalism more quickly than it was able to find a new use for the building.

“We enclosed the building, we boarded it up; we actually mowed the lawn for one or two summers.”

A proposal by the Disabled American Veterans to convert Draper into assisted living apartments for veterans was considered at length but never advanced to the point of purchase, Gillen said.

“We welcomed the interest from the DAV, unfortunately they weren't able to put the project together financially,” he said.

In October 2013, the county placed the building up for auction, drawing a single bid — for \$25,000, from Duanesburg businessman Jeff Senecal.

Gillen called the apartment conversion a good project for the space and said Sunrise — which has led or contributed to a dozen projects totaling about 1,000 housing units since Holland founded it in 1998 — is the right company to make it happen.

“They know the business really well,” he said. “We're thrilled that it's going forward. It was a very high priority for the town, for the county Legislature.”

Metroplex is providing a \$125,000 facade improvement grant for the project. A payment in lieu of taxes agreement will start at \$90,000 the first year and increase annually for 10 years, after which the PILOT will expire and the building will be taxed at its full assessed value.

## Part of community

Like the others involved in the project, Gillen noted the place Draper holds in the hearts of the community.

“There’s a lot of fond memories of that school, a lot of alumni,” he said.

County Legislator Holly Vellano of Rotterdam said she has been following the redevelopment proposal as it worked its way through the approval process.

“I’m very excited about it. It’ll certainly revitalize the area,” she said. “Preserve that old fortress!”

She’s not an alum, having attended high school in Schenectady, but her siblings graduated from Draper.

“Everybody in Rotterdam for several decades went to Draper,” she said. “There’s such an affection for that school.”

Deputy Town Supervisor Evan Christou is another person with a close appreciation of Draper’s history being the community’s history. He’s not a graduate, because his family moved to the Schalmont district after seventh grade, but he recalls a nice coincidence from his years at Draper: His third-grade teacher was in her first year of teaching when she had him at Draper and in her final year of teaching when she had his son at Mohonasen.

These kind of connections crop up frequently in Rotterdam, and Christou still sees a lot of his former classmates come into his restaurant, Tops American Grill, at the Five Corners.

“There’s a lot of history, a lot of nostalgia in these walls,” he said Wednesday, standing in the school’s crumbling parking lot.