

## Forgotten school a menace to street

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DETROIT -- Residents of a west side neighborhood are bedeviled by a large abandoned building that has become a haven for drug dealers and other criminals. Parents are afraid to let their children go outside. Vandalized cars dot the streets near the empty structure. And the building, open to trespass, is suspected to contain asbestos and other harmful materials.

But this building, a hazard to children and everyone else in the area, is not an old house or an abandoned party store -- it's a school, owned and ostensibly maintained by Detroit Public Schools.

"It's been sitting like that forever. It's unbelievable," said Letitia Williams, 38, president of the Tuxedo Block Club, which has been working for years to get Henry Philip Tappan Intermediate School demolished.

The building, vacant since 1990, is owned by Detroit Public Schools, which has yet to demolish the property.

In September, a Detroit News investigation found that 1,181 vacant buildings stood within a block of a city school. The buildings endanger students because, residents and police say, they shelter rapists, crack dealers and marauding dogs. Vacant buildings played a role in at least three of 10 rapes of school girls last fall.

In the case of Tappan, instead of buildings in a neighborhood endangering a school, it is a district-owned building that endangers a neighborhood.

"It's horrible," Williams said. "There is drug-dealing all the time. Cars come up and beep, people run in and run out. Who knows what goes on in there? We call the police, and they have to come out to board the place up. Then the door gets kicked in that week, and they're back at it."

Reached Friday, district spokesman Stan Childress said the school was slated for demolition, but he had no idea when. "It definitely is on the demolition list, we just don't have a date," he said.

He said he didn't know why the building's demolition may have been delayed, but said someone could reasonably surmise that the building contained the hazardous material asbestos.

Today, the doors to the once-beautiful building are wide open. Inside, lockers, light fixtures and other metal objects have been stripped. The school's auditorium has been demolished, the chairs kicked over, the walls smashed and the roof partially caved in. Huge stalactites of ice hang in the hallways over murals once painted carefully by school children to commemorate civilization's triumphs: the discovery of fire, ancient Egypt, sailing to America.

The building's basement is a dark catacomb strewn with empty liquor bottles and shattered furniture.

The large building, which was supposed to be long gone, has instead become a bane of the neighborhood.

Neighbors angry

Edward Buchanan, 64, who has lived on Tuxedo for 24 years, said neighbors have tried to get the Tappan building demolished.

"We tried and tried to get it torn down, and they told us they would do it," he said. "But nothing has happened. It's free and open for kids to go in there and cause all kinds of trouble."

The current sorry state of Tappan as one of Detroit's scariest abandoned buildings has its roots in a school board decision in 1990. In June of that year, the board voted to close 16 schools in which enrollment had dropped as a way to save money.

Nearly 2,000 students and about 200 teachers were affected by the closings, and many parents complained bitterly about the decision. At the time, district officials said they were looking into selling or leasing the properties.

Today, the other buildings have been rehabilitated as new schools or demolished with money from a special \$1.5 billion school bond passed by Detroit voters in 1994. Tappan was supposed to be demolished with bond money as well, but it wasn't torn down.

A 1999 investigation by The Detroit News found that the expenditure of the bond money was fraught with cronyism and mismanagement. District officials paid for work that was never performed, hired inexperienced companies to manage the construction work and awarded contracts without competitive bids. Like many other projects, Tappan's demolition fell through the cracks.

Riffraff moves in

Williams, who grew up in the neighborhood, said she remembers the building being used as a base of operations by U.S. Army units during the 1967 riots. She said that when the school closed, the neighborhood believed officials when they said they wanted to turn Tappan into a community center.

Instead, it sat idle. Vandals arrived quickly. Scavengers with trucks spent weeks in the building, she said, and hauled away anything of any value. Troublemakers have since used the building, especially in warmer weather, as their own base of operations.

Detroit officials first told Williams that the building didn't exist in their inventory. Once she got a city inspector out, she thought action would be taken. Various city contractors have come out at times in the last year. One contractor told her the building, which is open to trespass, is rife with asbestos and other harmful materials. And despite the visits, the large building, located off the Jeffries freeway on American, remains a haven for drug dealers, scavengers and other criminals.

"It needs to go," Williams said. "It's a hazard. But what can I do? I can just report to the city that it's still up and still has all these problems. They keep saying it's coming down, but there it is."

#### On the Web

Since April 1998, efforts to demolish abandoned buildings near Detroit schools have failed to combat the deterioration of many neighborhoods. A Detroit News investigation found nearly 1,200 empty shops, factories and houses within a block of public schools in Detroit -- and 57 of the structures are city-owned. To read past reports on this issue, visit <http://detnews.com/specialreports>.

Caption: The Tappan Intermediate School was stripped within weeks of its closure in 1990 and now is a haven to drug dealers and a danger to the community, neighbors say. Middle-class homes line Tuxedo Street at American Avenue, where the abandoned Tappan School sits. Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News Morris Richardson II / The Detroit News

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