



# **Town of Banner Elk, NC**

**Construction Professionals Network Institute:**

**Historic Banner Elk School**

**Observations and Recommendations**

**December 10 & 11, 2015**



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## CPNI Mission and Focus

The Construction Professionals Network Institute, Inc. ("CPNI") is a non-profit initiative focusing on construction industry related projects and community service throughout the State of North Carolina. CPNI was founded in 2006 by CPN of North Carolina, Inc. ("CPN"), a non-profit construction industry membership organization, to expand its mission of service to the construction industry and provide assistance to communities throughout North Carolina. CPNI was incorporated as a non-profit § 501 (c) (3) corporation in 2011 to focus on education and community services.

The CPNI mission statement is to "utilize our diverse expertise for the common good of the membership, industry and community."

CPNI volunteers its members' design and construction industry expertise as a catalyst to empower communities across North Carolina to improve their physical and economic environment. CPNI responds to these issues with original research, educational programs, and community service involving all aspects of the Construction Industry. CPNI members are passionate in sharing their diverse expertise to empower the communities to help themselves.

Thousands of volunteer hours by CPNI members are focused on and conducted on activities within North Carolina each year. CPNI strives to identify emerging issues related to industry performance, economic development and the betterment of CPNI members and the communities they serve.

CPNI places great value on the diversity of its membership. All of the operational and administrative activities of CPNI are currently provided by volunteers from the CPN membership and through contract relationships with professional/support organizations and student interns and researchers through North Carolina universities and institutions of higher education. Operational funding has been provided through annual CPN member contributions and pledges as well as corporate and foundation grants.

CPNI concentrates on revitalization initiatives by focusing on revitalizing, and reinvigorating, the legacy built environment and infrastructure of Tier 1 and Tier 2 communities across the State of North Carolina. As North Carolina's economy shifts away from legacy industries such as tobacco, textiles, and furniture, a large amount of the State's industrial and commercial built environments and utility infrastructure, in both the urban and rural setting, lie either dormant or abandoned.

These dormant assets represent a tremendous investment of sunken capital in terms of economic, environmental and social resources. Many of these once busy properties are now potential EPA

Brownfield Program sites, suspected of contamination, or in an unknown condition. They remain unused and underutilized assets on the community balance sheet. Because they are difficult to reposition and revitalize, they continue to lie underutilized or dormant resulting in a negative impact on the surrounding community fabric.

CPNI offers the comprehensive professional and technical expertise of its membership and collaborating partners, tailored to the specific project at hand, to assist these struggling Tier 1 and Tier 2 rural communities. CPNI values our relationships with each community and respects each community's values and unique attributes. CPNI's role is to work with local governments and community leaders to facilitate discussions and efforts toward redevelopment strategy, community engagement, visioning and financial considerations.

As of January 2016, CPNI has completed or has underway engagements in Shelby, Windsor, Ramseur, Thomasville, Elkin, Siler City, Maysville and Banner Elk.



## The Historic Banner Elk School



The Town of Banner Elk agreed to purchase the Historic Banner Elk School from Avery County in September of 2014.

The Historic Banner Elk Elementary School is a unique and iconic cultural resource within the heart of downtown Banner Elk. Built in 1939 as a WPA project during the Great Depression, the stone building served as an elementary school for seventy-one years prior to being converted into a business incubator site by the Avery County Board of Commissioners. The Town of Banner Elk wishes to preserve the historic site for future generations, expand much needed parking for the downtown business community, promote and sustain its tourism economy by providing a convenient and beautiful central area for festivals, fairs, and other cultural events, and enhance the appearance and character of downtown Banner Elk through complimentary uses of this space. Located on 5.390 acres in downtown Banner Elk, the property is located next to Tate-Evans Municipal Park and the Town of Banner Elk Greenway trail. The location of this site will allow the Town of Banner Elk to provide additional parking for its downtown merchants and is connected by municipal sidewalks to downtown businesses and other points of interest within the Town of Banner Elk. No other site is available within the Town of Banner Elk which would provide this amount of additional parking and opportunities with this level of convenience to the downtown community.

The Town of Banner Elk recognizes the benefits of government working to assist businesses within the community and providing the necessary infrastructure for the business community to succeed. The Town of Banner Elk feels that its lodging establishments, restaurants, and other businesses are closely

tied to its scenic and idyllic character as a tourism destination. The Town of Banner Elk further feels that through promoting the preservation of historic sites such as the Historic Banner Elk Elementary School, increasing the number of opportunities for tourism and destination related events, and encouraging a healthy and vibrant downtown are important and vital needs of the Town of Banner Elk in planning for its future success. For these reasons, the Town of Banner Elk found that the purchase of the Historic Banner Elk Elementary School was a necessary and expedient acquisition for the Town. It will provide uses for Banner Elk citizens and the community at large as well as allow for planning for the future growth of the Town's businesses and tourism related industries.

## Team Participants

### **BANNER ELK OFFICIALS AND VOLUNTEERS:**

- Brenda Lyerly- Mayor Town of Banner Elk
- Charlie B. VonCanon- Member Town Council
- Allen Bolick- Member Town Council, Chair Book Exchange Committee
- Ted Silver- Chair HBES Fundraising Committee, Board Friends of the HBES
- Tom McMurray- Chair HBES Use Committee
- JoAnn McMurray- President Banner Elk Chamber of Commerce
- Penny VonCanon- Member Planning Board
- Judy Hilsmier- President Great Banner Elk Heritage Foundation
- Cheryl Buchanan- Town Staff, Tax Collection, Planning and Zoning
- Rick Owen- Town Manager
- Fred Schmitt- Interim Project Manager

### **CPNI VOLUNTEERS:**

- Arty Bolick, team leader – Attorney, Brooks Pierce
- Bill Blancato – Attorney, Doughton Blancato
- Sun Breza – Engineer, ECS Carolinas
- Judy Brumley - Marketing Specialist, PIP Printing
- Doug Burns – Architect, KSQ Architects
- Robert Coon – Surety Agent, Scott Insurance
- Richard Conner – Attorney, Conner, Gwyn, Schenck
- Jody Efird – Architect, ESPA, Architects and Planners



## DECEMBER 10 & 11 VISIT and DISCUSSION

- CPNI volunteers and Town Volunteers (the “Team”) began the day by meeting at Town Hall.
- The Team discussed the general history of School, previous efforts to raise funds, and the Town’s goals for future of the School.
- The Team also discussed current uses, including the Woolly Worm Festival, the lending library, and the partnership with Mayland Community College, as well as other nearby activities such as the summer concerts in the nearby ampitheater.
- The Team also discussed economic conditions around Town, including retail, hospitality and service sectors.
- CPNI understands the Town desires to maintain the School for public use.
- The Team discussed how the School could ultimately enhance other Town assets as well as the business community.



Pictured: Sun Breza (left) at meeting with Ted Silver (center) and Town Manager Rick Owen (right).





Pictured: Doug Burns (left facing), Jodi Efird (left center), Bill Blancato (right center), Judy Brumley (far right), and Allen Bolick (left rear).



Pictured (left to right): Bill Blancato, Sun Breza, Richard Conner, Charlie Von Cannon, Allen Bolick, Rick Owen.

- After meeting adjourned, CPNI Team discussed various issues and ideas over lunch.
- Following lunch, Team reconvened to tour the Historic Banner Elk School.



Pictured: Team entering Historic Banner Elk School to begin tour.





Pictured: Rear courtyard.



Pictured: Renovated classroom.

## OBSERVATIONS

- Overall, the School is a beautiful site with wonderful potential.
- The main stone building is worth preserving.
- Both the front greenspace, and the rear courtyard are tremendous assets for future uses.
- There are Issues with the building that need to be assessed and addressed.
  - CPNI team observed the following regarding the building condition:
    - Suspect the presence of mold in the cafeteria building



Pictured: Kitchen area in cafeteria.

- Water intrusion - water flowing underneath entirety of building
  - Evidence of water moving over vapor barrier



- Cracks over windows in exterior stone construction over southeast and southwest corner windows in gym area.



Pictured above and below: Cracks over windows.





Pictured: Cracks in rear wall.

Large hole on southeast side of stone building that would allow water to penetrate directly to the building foundation.



Pictured: Hole on southeast side of building.

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## Recommendations

- **Condition assessment needed with particular attention to asbestos, lead, mold and water penetration.**
- **Code assessment also required.**
  - Handicap ramp access seems hastily designed and out of place.
  - CPNI members observed spalling of concrete on rear ramp.
- Total cost of condition and code assessment likely to be between \$20,000 and \$30,000.
  - Funding sources may be available for a proper assessment.
    - Z Smith Reynolds Foundation
    - Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)
    - Other grant possibilities<sup>1</sup>
    - State funds through partnership (see below)
- **Partner with Another Entity to Manage the Property.**
  - Town appears to lack the capacity and expertise to properly manage the site as an ongoing enterprise.
  - Fundraising efforts and pursuit of grant money likely would continue in perpetuity.
  - A partner with management capacity and expertise can alleviate the burden on the Town, while maintaining the Town's goal of preserving the School for public use.

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<sup>1</sup> There are a variety of other grants available. Finding them is not always easy. Also, it is important for the Town leaders to have consensus on the grant purpose before applying.

- **Until consensus on future use is reached, discontinue renovation efforts.**
  - Would be a mistake to continue to spend money on renovations until the Town completes the assessment and know what is critical to preservation of the building.
  - In particular, it would not be wise to spend money to add roof to addition building until condition assessment complete. Roofing appears adequate to preserve the structure until future use can be determined.



Pictured: Exterior of Addition

- CPNI team does not see value in preserving the addition. It takes away aesthetically from the remainder of the building and is unsuitable for any purpose beyond classroom / lab / storage space.
- Courtyard could be preserved through construction of an aesthetic wall.

## **Suggestions for Future Use**

- Main building current configuration would only allow for light retail and community focused functions such as what you see today.
  - Would need an anchor retail tenant with an established brand to drive traffic.
  - Too far off the road to attract traditional retail without some other draw to the facility.

## **Potential Partnership with a Private Developer**

- Utilize newly authorized public / private partnership model- would need to advertise and follow procurement procedure.
- Use the already established 501(c)(3) Friends of the Historic Banner Elk School ("Friends") organization to serve as the intermediary as is done in the more traditional model.
  - The Town would lease all or part of the School to Friends.
  - Friends would lease all or part of the School to a private enterprise.
  - Friends would manage any dedicated community space the Town would like to preserve.
  - The Town could entirely exclude the green space in the front of the School and convert it into a park.
  - The property would then revert back to the tax rolls generating additional revenue for the Town.
  - The Town would retain control use either through zoning or terms of the lease.
- Potential uses with private partner:
  - Hotel amenities for a hotel constructed on adjacent site
    - Hotel space in the downtown area is needed.

- Could drive summer, leaf and ski season traffic.
- School could be repurposed to provide amenities for the hotel -
  - Restaurant / bar
  - Coffee shop
  - Gift Shops and other retail
  - Spa / workout center
- Food / entertainment
- Farm to table restaurant
- Music / theater venue - bring the success of the amphitheater and festivals on the green space inside during the fall and winter months.
- Organic / local market
- Brewery / distillery
- Local Craft co-op
- For all of these potential uses, the challenge is to find a developer with the funds necessary to convert the space and bring the plan to reality.
- CPNI suggests the Town seek opportunities with businesses and individuals that have expressed prior interest in downtown development.

## Partnership with North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences

- The North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences (“Museum”) is interested in auxiliary locations in rural communities across North Carolina.
- Museum opened a similar concept in Whiteville, North Carolina.



Pictured: Exterior of North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville



Pictured: Exhibit in North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville



- Team members Richard Conner and Arty Bolick have reached out to the Museum and met with the Museum Director and Regional Network Chief.
- Museum is interested in continuing discussion with Town leaders.
- Museum has suggested Town leaders meet with Museum officials and visit both the Whiteville Museum as well as the main Museum in Raleigh.
- Funding would remain a challenge. With an attractive purpose in mind, however, fund raising may prove easier.



Pictured: Naturalist Center in North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville.

- Other Uses Discussed by the Team:
  - Outdoor center to support local biking, hiking fly fishing and rafting activities.
  - Health care / YMCA extension
  - Senior center – although the Team question whether there is a need and whether use would justify devoting the facility as a senior center.
  - Senior living - upscale - downside is that would take away from the desire to preserve public access.
  - Welcome Center
  - Lees McRae Extension
  - Mayland CC Extension



Pictured: Lending Library in Historic Banner Elk School.



## **CONTACT INFORMATION:**

**CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS NETWORK, INC.**

[www.cpni.org](http://www.cpni.org)

**336.379.0603**

[info@cpni-nc.org](mailto:info@cpni-nc.org)

**H. ARTHUR BOLICK II**

**336.271.3170**

[abolick@brookspierce.com](mailto:abolick@brookspierce.com)