

## Venice Gondolier Sun (FL)

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### VHS' relocation more than rumors

Tom Slaughter assumed he was going to a meeting about Envision Venice.

Turns out, the meeting called by Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice was really about potential relocation of Venice High School off the island.

Teri Hansen, GCCFV president and CEO, and **VHS** principal Candace Millington wanted to ask Slaughter, the city's planning and zoning director, about their "options" concerning improvements and even relocation of the 51-year-old facility.

GCCFV wanted to know what could be built on the school's 73 acres next to the Intracoastal Waterway if it were relocated, according to Slaughter's e-mail memo. As a financial investment and method to promote workforce housing, the charitable foundation already has a 146-acre project proposed in North Venice.

**VHS'** possible relocation came as news to City Manager Marty Black and Venice City Council members, who have always stated the city doesn't want the high school leaving the island. City government views **VHS** as more than just classrooms, but instead as part of Venice's identity -- Friday night football games, high school plays and community events.

"For some time there have been rumors in the community regarding plans by the school board to relocate Venice High School and sell the property for a large-scale, multi-story residential development," Black stated in a memo to Sarasota County Schools Superintendent Gary Norris.

"I had thought that this issue was resolved as part of the campaign for the tax extension with your and other school board representative comments to rebuild Venice High School as part of that program."

Staying put ... for now

Norris emphatically denied the district plans on relocating the high school.

Instead, this week's meeting simply kicked off what will be up to a year's worth of discussions and public meetings about its future -- including possible relocation.

While conditions in community areas such as the auditorium and football field appear fine, many of the classrooms for the school's 2,205 students are in questionable shape. The district is still analyzing a report that will determine if **VHS** should be renovated or demolished.

The school was originally built in 1955, and its campus is made up of 35 permanent buildings, 27 portable classrooms and athletic facilities that include a gymnasium, football stadium, baseball/softball complex, tennis courts and swimming pool.

"There are no plans to relocate Venice High School," Norris said. "The only plans we have right now are engaging the community of Venice the next six to 12 months about what our high school should be like. ... The school board, the superintendent, the high school principal do not have any hidden agenda."

A minimum of 100 acres is needed to relocate **VHS**, School board member Kathy Kleinlein said at the Venice-Nokomis Rotary Club Teacher of the Year presentation May 11.

Kleinlein went on to say the board is committed to making improvements, which could include relocating the high school.

Both Norris and Hansen said GCCFV's only role is "to facilitate the conversation," and ruled out any potential land swaps of the 73 acres of **VHS** and the 146 acres GCCFV owns on Laurel Road. Extensive wetlands at GCCFV's property negate that option even if it were being considered, Hansen said.

GCCFV wants the **VHS** discussion to replicate the Envision Venice process the city is using to determine future development and growth in the city. A series of public meetings and workshops will be held, Hansen said.

"We need to give the public tours of the high school and see the facility. ... Its condition is unacceptable and the students are unable to be taught to the best in the best of all environments and that's not OK."

Future intentions

Black formally asked Norris the district's intentions for **VHS**, and was given similar answers to what the superintendent told the Gondolier Sun.

City council has not issued a formal opinion about relocation of **VHS**. However, both the city manager and council members have previously stated the elementary and high schools, airport, post office, hospital and city hall are directly connected to the island's identity.

And without being convinced otherwise, they'd oppose relocation of any of those facilities.

"It would be difficult to see how moving Venice High School outside the city limits and off the island would be conducive to maintaining the sense of community and place that comes from an active campus," Black wrote to Norris.

"In the event that the school board desires to pursue relocation, I would request that a more formal process and detailed level of coordination occur early in your planning process."

Slaughter said he received no clear direction from GCCFV or **VHS** about relocation, admitting in an interview that he felt like they were "picking his brain" for the city's stance.

He offered to work with Millington and **VHS** to spread awareness about the poor building conditions in an effort to generate support.

As for relocation and redevelopment support, that needs to come from the city manager and council members.

For example, the high-profile Venetian Waterway Park bike path weaves across school property and it's unclear how private redevelopment would affect park access.

"You're dealing with a major land-use change," Slaughter said of **VHS** going from public to private use. "I think it's appropriate to have a meeting with the public, the community that would be impacted by that."

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