



A defining gem of the school on Main Street in Napoleon, Ohio, the central entrance features three striking fanlight windows, signature elements cherished for their timeless beauty.

The Truth About the Building's Condition

While some may assume an older building like this has fallen into disrepair, the campus in Napoleon, Ohio, is structurally sound, well-maintained, and has been continuously cared for by the Cultural Center of Henry County (CCHC). The facility has remained in use for community events, and regular upkeep has ensured that it is far from the neglected state many might imagine. Unlike many abandoned structures, this building has no widespread mold issues, no significant structural concerns, and remains a viable space for transformation.

What Makes This Building an Ideal Candidate for Preservation?

- **Strong Architectural Foundation:** Built with durable materials and designed to last.
- **Interior Spaces:** The two gyms, cafeteria, JLL auditorium, and a handful of classrooms are nearly ready for public use.
- **Ongoing Maintenance Efforts:** Volunteers and supporters have continued to lovingly care for the space.
- **Cost-Effective vs. Demolition:** Revitalization is far more economical than demolition and rebuilding.

Community Needs

There are very few dedicated spaces in town for performing arts, after-school activities, or team athletics. Multiple sports leagues, youth groups, Special Olympics, and individuals have expressed interest in utilizing the space, underscoring the need for a well-equipped, multi-use facility to support local programs.

The 128,000 sq. ft. facility includes 50 classrooms, 23 additional spaces of varying sizes, two gymnasiums, a 700-seat auditorium with a full stage, and a 4,000 sq. ft. cafeteria. The surrounding grounds feature a spacious front green mall, a full athletic field and stadium, and multiple parking areas.

Critical Change to Building Code

In November 2017, five months after the Napoleon Area City Schools (NACS) transferred the title to CCHC, the state building code changed. The new code, aimed at preserving historic buildings, allowed upgrades to be forgone unless a building inspector identified an obvious danger to occupants. This change meant many of the initially planned upgrades were no longer required for operation, resulting in enormous cost savings.

Legal Challenges

The former Central School property, including the historic John L. Johnson Auditorium, was sold by the Napoleon Area City Schools (NACS) Board of Education to the Cultural Center of Henry County in 2017. The legal dispute began when the City of Napoleon, along with the school board, sought to regain control of the property to enforce a demolition clause. The Cultural Center has opposed demolition and remains dedicated to preserving and repurposing the building as a multi-purpose community hub for the arts, education and athletics.

Covid Implications & Fundraising Hurdles

CCHC, like so many other nonprofits, experienced significant fundraising challenges during the pandemic.

“Nonprofits lost an estimated \$100 billion in funding in 2020 due to the pandemic. The report found that the largest losses were experienced by nonprofits in the arts, culture, and recreation sectors, followed by nonprofits in the education and human services sectors.” — Report by the National Council of Nonprofits

During this time, volunteers were managing their own family priorities, essential service organizations were under extraordinary pressure, and Ohio’s schools, businesses, and communities faced unprecedented hardships. Given these circumstances, CCHC was unable to meet its initial fundraising projections. Rather than exploring collaborative solutions or extending deadlines for fundraising efforts, the City of Napoleon instead pursued legal action against CCHC. Meanwhile, it secured a Brownfield grant—not for preservation or redevelopment, but for the demolition of the school.

“Evolving financial behavior, an unpredictable public policy atmosphere, and an unparalleled global pandemic collaborated to disrupt nonprofit fundraising. The COVID-19 pandemic alone exacerbated consumer demands for nonprofit services.” — Van Steenburg et al., Journal of Consumer Affairs (2022)

Powered By Volunteers

Despite the fundraising challenges brought on by the pandemic and a lack of support from the city, the dedication of CCHC’s volunteers has remained unwavering. A team of passionate board members and a handful of other committed volunteers have contributed over 15,000 hours—not for personal gain, but because they recognize the tremendous value of repurposing this former school into something everyone in the community can enjoy.

Get Involved

Discover ways to support and participate by visiting ThreeArchesOhio.com.