

Former Rosenwald school will open in August

BY STEFANIE BOWMANN

Eastern Shore Post

The former Cape Charles Elementary School, which historically served Black students and closed in 1966, will reopen this August with a new purpose as a community center and a new name to be revealed later this year.

“One thing that we always say is that ... this movement, this initiative, really is divine ... because of the things that have happened along the way,” said Tevya Griffin, president of the nonprofit working to restore the historic school.

The building originally was offered for sale for \$1 million, but a private message on Facebook in 2019 began a process that led to the Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative purchasing the building for \$275,000.

The nonprofit’s name refers to the late Julius Rosenwald, the former Sears Roebuck president who partnered with Booker T. Washington to build more than 5,000 schools for Black children, including Cape Charles Elementary, which opened in 1929.

After the school closed during desegregation, it was used as an eel-packing plant until 1977. The building sat empty for decades and fell into disrepair before finally being purchased by CCRSRI.

The nonprofit has raised more than \$2.5 million for the restoration project as of November 2024.

The project has included recent improvements such as installation of a new roof and reinstallation of windows that had been stored in the building’s attic, Griffin said.

The Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative held a special event at the Cheriton fire station on Saturday, March 29, in which participants suggested programming that the new center could offer to fill the needs of the community.



EASTERN SHORE POST/STEFANIE BOWMANN

Event attendees included, clockwise from left, Suzanne Hiler, Onley Baptist Church; Dudley Harris, Hampton Roads Workforce Council; the Rev. Felton Sessoms, First Baptist Church, Cape Charles; and the Rev. Stephanie Castro, St. Paul AME Church in Pungoteague and St. Joseph AME Church in Belle Haven.

Eastern Shore Community College has already partnered with the nonprofit and will offer classes at the community center, including unmanned aerial systems, dental assisting, hospitality, core construction fundamentals, English as a second language, and adult basic education.

Event attendees worked in small groups to generate dozens of suggestions for additional programming at the community center.

Some ideas focused on education, employment, and financial wellness, such as additional courses in trades,

ServSafe certification, tutoring, employment seeker services, and financial and estate planning.

Suggested options to promote health and wellness included urgent care access, diet and nutrition education, and life coaching and mental health services.

Other suggestions included Spanish translation services and helping community members understand and fill out forms.

There was a consensus that programming for all ages, from youth to seniors, should be offered and include

family-oriented activities like generational storytelling, talent shows, and music programs, bringing young and old together.

The event also featured a panel of local faith leaders, including several pastors of churches belonging to the Mt. Sinai Church of Christ Deliverance group, who agreed that Eastern Shore churches must collaborate to better serve the community.

Pastor Ralph Harmon said, “When we band together, we’re a whole lot stronger.”