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THE VOICE OF ACCOMACK AND NORTHAMPTON COUNTIES ON VIRGINIA'S EASTERN SHORE

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Cape Charles Rosenwald School sets opening timeline

BY STEFANIE BOWMANN
Eastern Shore Post

The historic Cape Charles Rosenwald school, formerly Cape Charles Elementary School, is undergoing restoration and expected to reopen as a community center in roughly six months to one year.

“We have the opportunity to impact ... the children. Not only the children, but also the community,” said Adrian Gardner, the community engagement leader on the newly formed advisory council to the board of the Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative, a nonprofit.

The historic brick building on Old Cape Charles Road, just beyond the former railroad overpass commonly called “the hump,” is named after the late Julius Rosenwald, former president of Sears Roebuck.

(Continued on page 8)



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Members of the newly formed Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative's advisory council are, from left, co-chairs Adrian Gardner, Dianne Davis, Christopher Lyon, Hazel Bland Thomas, Dora Sullivan, Malik Gholson Means, and Richard Press. Members not pictured are Tyrone L. Beach Sr., Donna Olney Kohler, Chuck Little, Subrina Owens Parker, and Pauline Mapp Foreman.

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School

(Continued from page 1)

Rosenwald partnered with Booker T. Washington during the Jim Crow era to build more than 5,000 schools for Black students.

Cape Charles Elementary School served students from 1929 until 1966, when it closed during integration.

The building later was used as an eel-packing plant that closed in 1977.

The Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative, founded by Tevya Griffin, became a nonprofit in 2014 with the goal of restoring the school to serve the community once again.

The nonprofit raised funds and purchased the former Cape Charles Elementary in 2019 for \$275,000.

To date, the nonprofit has raised more than \$2.5 million for the purchase and rehabilitation of the school.

Its current fundraising goal is an additional \$1.2 million to reach the total project cost of \$3.7 million.

“It seems like a lot ... but we’ve done it before,” Griffin said on Saturday, Nov. 16.

It was the first time the board of the Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative met with its new advisory council. The meeting followed a tour of the school highlighting its ongoing improvements.

The rehabilitated school will feature an auditorium accommodating up to 120 guests, a combination historical exhibit and classroom space that can be divided by an operable wall, a commercial kitchen, a conference room, an office, a storage room, and two restrooms.

The total capacity of the building will be 250.

The Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative advisory board is prepared to do community outreach and engagement to

determine the community’s needs and build on the goals that the nonprofit previously established for the former elementary school.

Those include a partnership with Eastern Shore Community College, which will offer in-person and remote instruction at the school based on the needs of the community.

The community includes not just Cape Charles or Northampton County but the entire Eastern Shore of Virginia, Griffin noted.

The overarching goal of the school and community center is to break down barriers to educational opportunities and end the cycle of generational poverty.

Hazel Thomas, a member of the advisory council, recommended that the nonprofit preserve its current relationships with schools like ESCC and the College of William & Mary and also involve other colleges and universities.

Not many youth on the Eastern Shore have a “collegiate mindset” because they have had little exposure to opportunities for secondary education, she said.

Gardner would like to see the community center provide not only education and workforce training but also job placement.

“Work is changing. The community is changing. We can be a part of that,” he said.

Advisory council members additionally suggested offering financial literacy courses for both youth and adults.

Dianne Davis, board liaison, also noted the need for programming and offerings that will make area youth feel welcome.

The community center is expected to receive its certificate of occupancy in June 2025, said board member Beth Walker, who is also the nonprofit’s assistant secretary and project manager.

She looks forward to the development of a “solid plan” for the facility, which is expected to be fully open to the public by January 2026, she said.



EASTERN SHORE POST/STEFANIE BOWMANN PHOTO

A salvaged piece of the Cape Charles Rosenwald School’s stage curtain has been framed as part of the building’s restoration.



EASTERN SHORE POST/STEFANIE BOWMANN PHOTO

New windows and a new roof grace the outside of the Cape Charles Rosenwald School.