

\$1M state award helps former school renovation

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Eastern Shore Post

Tevya Griffin, who lives in Williamsburg but is from Northampton County, was visiting her grandmother, the late Annette Marie Williams, in 2009.

They went for a drive in Cape Charles and passed the former elementary school over “the hump” — the local nickname for the overpass that was built to cross the former railroad that ran through town.

Griffin’s grandmother told her the story of the building that was used as an eel-packing plant that closed in the 1970s and previously was an elementary school for Black children during segregation.

The story captured Griffin, who wanted to learn more about the school’s history. Her grandmother helped her reach out to alumni who would later become members of the Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative.

Today the school is being restored and transformed into a community center that, within its first 10 years, is expected to create around 30 new jobs per year and have an economic impact of \$26 million, an economic analysis shows.

The restoration is aided by \$1 million from Gov. Glenn Youngkin through a state industrial revitalization fund. The award was announced in August.

Combined with previously obtained grants and other funding, the Cape Charles Elementary School project needs an additional \$600,000 to be fully funded. These funds can be obtained through two

\$300,000 no-interest bridge loans.

The community center could employ up to four full-time and 10 part-time workers as its managers, administrators, program coordinators, and maintenance and support staff, according to the analysis.

The center will house a museum with the potential to generate around 10 jobs for local artisans to make and sell traditional products, crafts, and souvenirs.

The former school’s 120-seat auditorium and other rooms will be available to rent for private events.

The restoration group estimates about 15 events will be held annually, which would support other jobs and generate event revenue and tax income.

The community center will have a commercial kitchen that is expected to support five to 10 jobs annually.

The workforce development center and business incubator is expected to make the biggest impact, annually preparing 20 to 50 skilled workers for jobs with higher wages.

Eastern Shore Community College and the Hampton Roads Workforce Council will collaborate to provide certificate programs at the community center.

The two entities also will provide mentorships for entrepreneurs to increase the number of startup businesses in Northampton County, which has been in decline since 2019.

It is the continuation of a project with roots in a casual conversation between a grandmother and granddaughter.



Tevya Griffin stands in front of the Cape Charles Rosenwald School in a 2020 photo.

School makes state register

Among five places listed in September in the Virginia Landmarks Register are a Cape Charles school built for Black children during the Jim Crow era of segregation in Virginia.

The Commonwealth’s Board of Historic Resources approved the Virginia Landmarks Register listings during its quarterly public meeting in Danville.

The VLR is the commonwealth’s official list of places of historic, architectural, archaeological, and cultural significance.

Built in 1929, the Cape Charles Rosenwald School in Northampton County was one of thousands of schools constructed using the Julius Rosenwald Fund for African American students during the Jim Crow era of segregation in Virginia’s public education system.

As was typical of schools for Black

children during segregation, grades were combined in classrooms at the Cape Charles school, with each teacher instructing students of two grade levels simultaneously.

Constructed of brick and stone, the school features banks of large windows to provide ample natural light and ventilation. The school’s interior remains largely intact. The building initially had no plumbing. There was a toilet and a water pump on the grounds. The auditorium was used for morning devotions, plays, and community meetings and presentations.

Cooking and woodworking classes took place in the industrial room, which was later converted into a lunchroom and, then, into a bathroom.

Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration, Inc., bought the property in 2018.