

A jolt to the Sacred Heart

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
Friday, 21 February 2020 09:49



School could be moving

It was Monday morning, Feb. 10, the start of a new week at the Sacred Heart Catholic School of Gallup. Teachers were gathering their supplies, preparing their lessons. Everything felt routine. That's when Father Mitchell Brown and Father Matthew Keller entered and requested that the teachers and the principal meet in the library.

The small assembly of about 12 people listened as Brown and Keller read a note about starting a parish school, which would move the school from 515 Park Ave. to the Sacred Heart Cathedral site at 555 S. Woodrow Dr. An artist's rendering lays out ambitious plans of a new school at the site.

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Hozho Academy, currently located at 306 NM-564, essentially on Gallup's south side, has its sights set on acquiring the Park Avenue site.

But the purchase is anything but routine.

It came as a surprise to the teachers, one of whom spoke under the condition of anonymity, said "this is a plan." It's not official. She added that she feels morale is pretty good around the school – that people are in a waiting period.

While the current staff takes in the news, the Vatican is learning about it, too. The proposal was presented at the Vatican in Rome by Bishop James Wall.

Suzanne Hammons, communications director of the Diocese of Gallup, says Wall is there for an "ad limina" gathering which takes place approximately every 8 years, and made the presentation concerning the building plan early this week to the Dicastery for Clergy congregation.

Hammons explained the "future plan," which includes selling the current Sacred Heart School campus and buildings to Aequitas Education, a 501(c) 3, for a sum large enough to cover the entire cost of building a new school. She did not name the amount.

She also said the school does not have the capital to continue the maintenance and necessary renovation of the existing buildings. Hammons said Aequitas Education intends to remodel the existing school campus for the use of Hozho Academy.

Anna Biava, the development director at Sacred Heart School, says the school has its own financial operation, and although the Diocese owns the property on which the school is located, the diocese only pays for the property tax on the school. She says the school is financially stable.

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“We have in place well developed short and long term plans for growth and sustainability which we have developed with a professional consultant,” Biava said. “We also have plans for capital improvement of the buildings, implementation school-wide athletics and our full fledged STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) programs next year. We have a well-developed business plan to generate significant revenue with our gymnasium.”

However, Keller doesn’t share Biava’s view on the financial shape of the school based on the condition of the campus building.

Keller says the Sacred Heart Catholic School was state-of-the-art when it was built in the 1950s, but it has three buildings, on the property and two of them are vacant. The gymnasium needs roofing and repairs. Enrollment has fallen and that makes it a struggle to maintain and renovate the school as it stands.

He also emphasized, what is under discussion now is a plan to reconnect the school with the cathedral, but nothing has been agreed upon yet. He, and Fr. Isaac Ogba, both said that the decision is up to the bishop.

Patrick Mason, the founder of Hozho Charter School, and whose firm is the legal counsel for the diocese, is the founding board member of Aequitas Education. He said during a phone interview that the Diocese of Gallup approached the organization about buying the property.

“In my role as president of Aequitas, we did our due diligence and we said that this is a good deal for us and that we would be willing to negotiate with the Diocese in the purchase of this property,” he said.

Mason also explained that he has no financial interest in this project. He says the numbers are currently up to three times the appraised property value. He did not give a number, but said, “We want to reach a fair market value for the property.”

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The value of the property or the ballpark sale price hasn't been revealed to the public. According to the Catholic Mutual Group policy that runs from July 7, 2019 - July 7, 2020, the campus is insured for over \$9.9 million. This includes over \$5.6 million for the school, nearly \$2.9 million for espelage center/gym, and over \$1.4 million for the classrooms.

The policy also features an additional \$5 million in "combined additional protection," and coverage for each priest on religious on assignment for the Diocese, along with some personal liability coverage.

Meanwhile, Keller said a new campus would feature a classical Catholic education mode. It will also feature a chapel, cafeteria, library, and family center.

But what does a classical Catholic education consist of?

Mason says classical education means an education that includes math, reading, science, art, music, literature, history, phonics, and more.

The teacher at Sacred Heart Catholic School who was reluctant to give her name, and who instructs students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, says she doesn't really know what a classical education is, but that she has been advised that it means education for the whole child — mind, body, and soul. She is now busy researching the concept.

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