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## School superintendent explains east Levy County school property situation

By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 14, 2018 at 12:08 p.m.

**BRONSON** -- Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison shared information about the county's property in eastern Levy County during a telephone interview Tuesday (Feb. 13).

Pastor Johnnie Jones III of the Ministerial Faith Alliance (MFA) told the Williston City Council recently that he would like the city to accept the Williston Middle School (WMS) property from the School Board and then give it to the MFA, because he has a plan to help the community by using that land and buildings, which are currently for sale by the county.

Jones has expressed his opinion based on his understanding of Florida law and past rulings in other school districts that the Levy County School Board could simply give the property to the MFA, because the non-profit charitable organization plans to use the land and buildings for the general welfare of the community members of the area.

Superintendent Edison said the School Board cannot give the WMS property to the MFA. The MFA must provide a monetary proposal to purchase the property from the School Board, Edison said.

Jones first approached former Levy County Superintendent of Schools Robert Hastings with the idea. Both WMS and the former Williston High School (WHS) are abandoned and for sale, since the students began classes at the new Williston Middle High School (WMHS) campus.

"We could give that facility to another public agency," Edison said. "We cannot give it to individuals or a group of individuals."

Edison said Jones was told when Hastings was superintendent that the price was \$2 million for the WMS campus and buildings, Edison said. He added that the School Board could have a public auction to accept bids on the property, but it has not done that yet.

Private interests have looked at the property, Edison said, but there are no offers to buy WMS right now.

"To Johnnie Jones and his group, I said 'Bring us a proposal,'" Edison said. "They have never brought us anything."

Edison said he would like to see a written proposal from the MFA if it wants the property, and the School Board has asked the city if it is interested in accepting the property. Edison said the School Board would like to move on with working toward giving the property to the city or selling it to another entity.

In an interview with School Board Member Chris Cowart on Monday (Feb. 12), Cowart said that the School Board has not heard from Pastor Jones or the MFA about a particular plan for the future use of that property.

Edison said the School Board sees the property could be a good asset for the city, or the School Board would like to sell the property to have dollars for capital improvements – especially for a football field and stadium at the new WMHS.

The new WMHS was built without a football field, Edison said, because it was built with special facilities funding from the Florida Legislature.

"So, when we sell that property (WMS and WHS)," Edison said, "our first order of business is that we will build those athletic facilities with those dollars. That's what we are trying to do."

When he was asked about the School Board's interest if it gave the WMS property to the City of Williston, he shared insight about history of land the Levy County School Board owns now in Williston.

The current Williston High School Baseball Field is away from the former campus of WHS

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and from the WMHS campus.

The baseball field is located near to Southeast Sixth Street and Southeast First Avenue (behind the Dollar General Store on East Noble Avenue {U.S. Alt 27}).

Years ago, Edison said, the Levy County School Board leased the property of the baseball field from the City of Williston. The price of the lease increased to the point, however, where the School Board said it would build a stadium for the people of the community and then take possession of the property.

On some maps, the property is named "Epperson Park."

The multi-year Florida High School Athletic Association Class 1A State Champion WHS Red Devils Baseball Team is scheduled for eight games on that home field this season, a WMHS receptionist said on Wednesday.

MaxPreps shows the baseball season just started.

In this same manner, Edison said, he believes the School Board of Levy County would like the WMS property to be used for the community of Williston.

Superintendent of Schools Edison said he can review a proposal from the MFA or from the City of Williston and then he will make a recommendation to the School Board.

It will be up to the five Levy County School Board members to decide to whom to sell or to give the WMS property, Edison said.

The current Levy County School Board is comprised of Chairman Cameron Asbell, Dist. 1 Bronson; Dist. 2 Cedar Key – Chris Cowart; Dist. 3 Williston – Vice Chairman Brad Etheridge; Dist. 4 Chiefland - Paige Brookins; and Dist. 5 Yankeetown - Rick Turner.

The final decision on how to dispose of the WMS property, and the WHS property for that matter, rests on Asbell, Cowart, Etheridge, Brookins and Turner currently.

In 2018, the following offices are up for election by the voters of Levy County: School Board – Dist. 1 – Asbell, Dist. 3 – Etheridge, and Dist. 5 – Turner.

In Levy County, Commissioner Rock Meeks (Dist. 2) and Commissioner Lilly Rooks (Dist. 4) are up for election too.

The seat for Levy County Court Judge J.T. "Tim" Browning is up for election too.

All five seats on the Levy County Soil and Water Conservation District are up for election.

As for the WMS property, Edison said the School Board would like the property to benefit the residents and visitor of Williston if the city accepts it from the School Board, Edison said, however it is up to the city to determine how that would happen, if that transaction between the two government bodies was completed.

In the meantime, the members of the Williston City Council, which is currently comprised of President Charles Goodman, Vice President Nancy Winger, Councilwoman Marguerite Robinson and Councilman Elihu Ross are scheduled to discuss the MFA and the WMS more at the Feb. 20 meeting.

That meeting is at the temporary Williston City Hall, which is scheduled to start at 7 p.m. in the former WHS Band Room, located in the multipurpose building at 427 W. Noble Ave. (U.S. Alt. 27).

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Private interests have looked at the property, Edison said, but there are no offers to buy WMS right now.

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Edison said the School Board sees the property could be a good asset for the city, or the School Board would like to sell the property to have dollars for capital improvements – especially for a football field and stadium at the new WMHS.

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“So, when we sell that property (WMS and WHS),” Edison said, “our first order of business is that we will build those athletic facilities with those dollars. That’s what we are trying to do.”

When he was asked about the School Board’s interest if it gave the WMS property to the City of Williston, he shared insight about history of land the Levy County School Board owns now in Williston, after first mentioning that whatever the city does with the property will be the decision of the city’s leaders.

The current Williston High School Baseball Field is away from the former campus of WHS and away from the new WMHS campus.

The baseball field is located near to Southeast Sixth Street and Southeast First Avenue (behind the Dollar General Store on East Noble Avenue {U.S. Alt 27}).

Years ago, Edison said, the Levy County School Board leased the property of the baseball field from the City of Williston. The price of the lease increased to the point, however, where the School Board said it would build a stadium for the people of the community and then take possession of the property.

The multi-year Florida High School Athletic Association Class 1A State Champion WHS Red

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Devils Baseball Team is scheduled for eight games on that home field this season, a WMHS receptionist said on Wednesday (Feb. 14).

MaxPreps shows the baseball season just started, although that service listed zero home games for the Red Devils as of Wednesday.

As far as the two government entities trading property, it is in this same manner, Edison said, that he believes the School Board of Levy County would like the WMS property to be used for the community of Williston via the city owning it.

Superintendent of Schools Edison said he can review a proposal from the MFA or from the City of Williston and then he will make a recommendation to the School Board.

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There are four Williston City Council members now, rather than five members, because former City Councilman Kori Lamb moved out of the city limits.

A Special City Election of the City of Williston is currently scheduled to on April 10, to electing one City Council member, for the remainder of his unexpired two-year term which began April 11, 2017. The Group “A” term expires on April 8, 2019. Candidates for the "Group A" seat may make application for City Council with a \$5 fee, plus a \$24 Election Assessment Fee to the City Clerk anytime between noon on Monday, Feb. 19, and noon on Friday, Feb. 23.

If more than one candidate qualifies, the special election is scheduled for April 10 from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the temporary Williston City Hall 427 W. Noble Ave. (U.S. Alt. 27), in the multipurpose building of the former WHS.