

## Fate of former school uncertain as matter heads to court

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**Bel Alton, MD** - As the ongoing conflict between Charles County and the Bel Alton High School Alumni Association and Community Development Corporation over the future of the old building, used to educate the county's African-American children from 1938-1965, continues to escalate, the situation is getting stickier than any spider's web.

The Bel Alton High School Alumni Association and Community Development Corporation has occupied the building for 21 years, but although they were a tenant, the county owned the building.

In February, the Charles County Commissioners met in closed session and elected to evict the association and changed the locks on the door.

Among the reasons given was that the building was costing the county in excess of \$200,000 in utility expenses.

Former Charles County Attorney Roger Fink, now with Scott Law Group LLC in La Plata and representing Bel Alton High School Alumni Association, filed a complaint for relief in Charles County District Court April 22. The case is scheduled for May 18.

"It is perplexing," Fink said. "Nobody's really sure what's going on. In the past, whenever there was a problem, the county commissioners would meet with the association and worked things out."

Fink said the complaint was a request for the county to change the locks back and restore the "status quo" of the association. After that, he said, it gets complicated.

"There were several grants—both federal and state—of \$4.5 million for the restoration of the building and another USDA grant of \$1.5 million," he said. "Each of the grants have different requirements. It will get a lot more complicated as we get down the road."

Charles County Commissioner President Peter Murphy said the county intends to lease different parts of the building to see if the county can't recoup some of the expenses the county has been burdened with in an attempt to keep the building operational.

"We do intend to allow space so that the Bel Alton High School Alumni Association can have museum and operational space there," Murphy said. "But the utilities for the building are very expensive and we need to see if we can make some of that money back the county has had to shell out over the years."

Janice Wilson, president of the Charles County Branch of the NAACP, said the Bel Alton School is a symbol for African-Americans that the community has been exceedingly protective of.

"The African-American population is now the majority population in Charles County," Wilson said, "yet, we have very little to call our own. At Bel Alton, they were offering programs and services to a lot of underprivileged people. I'd hate to lose that."

"It's disturbing," Wilson said. "This board of county commissioners says they want transparency, yet, there was no public hearing. This was done in closed session. You don't build trust by not sharing. It's disturbing to me."

"We want to raise awareness," she added. "We want a public hearing. We want a voice."

The Bel Alton High School Alumni Association has started an online petition in an effort to get support for their cause: [www.thepetitionsite.com/525/785/206/preserve-the-history-of-bel-alton-community-development-center-cdc/](http://www.thepetitionsite.com/525/785/206/preserve-the-history-of-bel-alton-community-development-center-cdc/).

Debbie Prohaska, president of the board of directors for Jude House, said they have a waiting list "a mile long" and wanted to rent space at the building, but that Joan Jones, president of the Bel Alton High School Alumni Association Community Development Corporation, wouldn't consider it.

"Jude House put in a formal bid through the county commissioners, and they talked to Mrs. Jones about a bid they got to rent the school," Prohaska said. "From what I understand, when they went to go to the school to walk through the school, she would not let them in. They had to advise her that was a county building."

"When Jude House put the bid in, there were six classrooms upstairs and 10 offices downstairs we wanted to turn into operating classrooms for Tri-County people to come in to start training them to getting back out in the system. We are at maximum capacity. There is a waiting list. The community can't even take them and begin their rehabilitation."

She said that 18 months ago Jude House made the State of Maryland governor's list of top 10 state recovery facilities.

"We have 90-95 percent graduation rate," she said.

Yet, Wilson said the Bel Alton High School Alumni Association has programs they offer as well: Job creation, employment training and assistance, health education, dental services, a banquet room and catering services.

Fink's complaint asks for the county to immediately provide the Bel Alton High School Alumni Association with keys to the new locks or restore the locks which were changed or removed.

Wilson noted that Jones, who is a member of the Charles County Planning Commission, helped to save the school from demolition and has steadfastly fought to raise money for its restoration despite financial problems.

Some have made accusations that she was unreasonable in her fervency to save the structure, but Fink said Jones is "quite bright."

"I wouldn't underestimate Joan at any time," he said.

