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MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2010

Today is the 270th day of the year. In 1939, Warsaw, Poland, surrendered after weeks of resistance to invading forces from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II.

BORN ON THIS DAY: Jayne Meadows, actress, 90; Arthur Penn, movie director, 88; Don Cornelius, producer ("Soul Train"), 74; Meat Loaf, rock singer, 63; Shaun Cassidy, singer, 52; Patrick Muldoon, actor, 42; Gwyneth Paltrow, actress, 38; Lil' Wayne, rapper, 28.



SEAN KIRST | POST-STANDARD COLUMNIST



Courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association

MANNY BRELAND (left), the last basketball coach at Syracuse Central High School, and **Don Merrill**, the school's last athletic director, take a final look at the school upon its closing in 1975. The majestic school would cost millions to renovate, but could be a gem on the southern edge of downtown.

GRAND OLD SCHOOLS DESERVE ATTENTION

Bob Gardino has never shied away from argument. The former Republican chairman in Syracuse often serves as a lightning rod. Yet he stood up Sunday at a forum at the Onondaga Historical Association and offered his case with such communal passion that it was hard for anyone in the room to disagree.

His eloquent summary cut to the heart of a debate I was asked to moderate: What do we do with Blodgett Elementary School and the old Central High School, two once-majestic landmarks whose restoration for classroom use would cost tens of millions of dollars?

Central served for decades as a downtown high school. Gardino, a retired teacher and vice president of Parents for Public Schools in Syracuse, recalled walking through the front doors for the first time, as a little boy. "I fell in love," he said, testifying to how monumental architecture can fuel childhood aspirations about knowledge.

While many in the crowd nodded their assent, it only brought them back to the overriding issue: Should Blodgett and Central be saved as schools, or used in some other way?

Central shut down as a high school in the 1970s. Blodgett — built as the old

If you go:

Rediscovering that Old High School Spirit: Syracuse's High Schools of Days Gone By.

Where: Onondaga Historical Association, 321 Montgomery St.

Hours: Through Oct. 17; 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday to Friday; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

What: A collection of yearbooks, trophies, photos and other materials from such now-closed high schools as North, Central, Blodgett Vocational, old Nottingham, Eastwood and Valley. Admission is free.

Vocational High School — remains in use as an elementary school on the Near West Side. Some argue that it makes no sense to retain Blodgett for classroom space, that economic logic in a shrinking city demands moving the pupils from that massive old building into classrooms at the Delaware, Seymour or Frazer schools.

Panelist Anne Messenger, of the Near Westside Initiative, said the notion flies against what the neighborhood wants. Messenger pointed to a burst of activity in the area, such as construction of new homes and plans by WCNY and ProLiteracy to move their corporate offices into the old Case Supply warehouse.

Those projects are "getting legs in the face of huge naysaying," Messenger said. Residents want Blodgett restored, she said, and the factors working against it are no more daunting than other obstacles the neighborhood has already pushed aside.

If one theme dominated the 90-minute conversation, it was a weariness with on-again, off-again ideas for saving the landmark schools. "It's a head-scratcher," said Doug Sutherland, a prominent developer, speaking of plans that have rolled in and washed out for the last decade. He wondered

about the millions available to the Joint Schools Construction Board, and about the entire strategy for restoring schools in Syracuse, and he asked why a similar initiative in Buffalo is moving at a much faster pace.

While panelist Sehl Burns contended that Central could be a magnificent center for teens seeking to learn a trade, Sutherland offered no opinion on what to do with either school, except for this: Both should be saved, whether for classroom space or some purpose outside of education. That demands making a choice and sticking with it, Sutherland said, which in turn demands "a vision or a plan or an implementation strategy." The real problem, he said, is eye-glazing indecision, which he described as emblematic of serial handwringing in this community.

"It just seems like nothing ever gets done," he said, "and I'd like to see something get done."

The point was echoed by Common Councilor Nader Maroun, who said the priority is getting a clear sense of what the community wants. Beth Crawford, of the Preservation Association of Central New York, said civic officials should be open to what's worked in other places — especially when partnerships between government and business triggered restorations that seemed otherwise impossible.

Maroun and Ned Deuel, of the board of education, agreed that the relationship between the school district and city hall is much better than often perceived. If so, the mutual responsibility of those governing bodies comes down to this: Central and Blodgett are grand landmarks intended to evoke soaring emotions, but every day of indecision is one more day in which they crumble.

In a cash-strapped era, we need to settle on what those buildings ought to be — then get it done.

