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Crane Creek: New lease on life

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When Crane Creek Elementary School closed in 2000, its five decades of wear and tear showed. Then vandals knocked out most of the windows.

Not long ago, the school looked like a disaster area. Now, it's an old school with a new purpose and a bright future, thanks to people who can look past its imperfections.

"What you see depends on whether you're looking at it with blinders or with rose-colored glasses," said Linda Carter, a deputy director of the Richland County Recreation Commission. "You've got to see beyond what you're looking at."

Richland District 1 transferred ownership of the school to the recreation agency in 2003. The agency first renovated the central portion, where the school offices were.

In recent months, the agency installed seven computers in a small room and started twice-a-week classes teaching mostly senior students how to use them. Another room is used for the agency's senior programs, including bingo on Thursdays. Youngsters gather at the school for a kids' night out program one Friday a month.

One of the first renovated rooms in the Crane Creek Community Center is used by the Lincolnshire Neighborhood Association for once-a-month meetings and by

a new church for twice-a-week services. The meeting room and the cafeteria can be rented by the hour, revenue that helps pay for the operation of the center.

The Richland County Sheriff's Department moved its officer's classroom training program to the wing that includes a mini-gym. That cut down on the vandalism, Carter noted.

And the place really should come to life in August with the first class of the Carolina School for Inquiry, a new charter school that will lease several classrooms for 90 students in grades K-5.

"It's been really a godsend for us," said Stacie Mandrell, board chairman and lead teacher for the school. "If we hadn't found it, we wouldn't be able to open."

Conversely, if the charter school hadn't come to the recreation agency looking for a temporary home, the largest wing of Crane Creek would have remained closed for awhile.

The agency didn't have money in its budget to cover all of the repairs. But the charter school offered to pay for new carpet if the agency paid for installation. Also, the charter school will pay its first-year lease of \$25,000 up front to help cover the \$75,000 cost of a new air conditioning system.

The charter school hopes to find its own home in three to five years, Mandrell said.

In the meantime, school leaders, children and parents will plant gardens on the property and install playground equipment that will be left behind.

It's a classic win-win situation for the recreation agency and the community. A new gymnasium and a walking trail for the center were on the proposed project list before Richland County Council put a hold on a bond proposal last year.

"We've been pleased thus far and hope they can keep on track," said Lee Edens, chairman of the community center advisory group. "We're excited about the possibilities that the future holds."

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