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Arts high school to house retail space

By Elizabeth Benton, Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — The Board of Education is venturing into the retail real estate business, renting out a 2,900 square-foot space on the ground floor of the new Cooperative Arts High School.

While schools often house student-run stores and Career High School even has a student-run credit union, it appears the school's retail space, to be staffed and patronized by the public, will be unique.

"I think it's a first," said state Department of Education spokesman Tom Murphy.

Nick Caruso, senior staff associate for field service at the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, said the idea was simply "too different" to even comment upon.

"I have not heard of anything like that before," he said.

Yale's University Properties manages most of the nearby retail real estate and is aiding the school district pro-bono in its search for tenants.

"We've talked to someone who is interested in doing some instrument repair. We're interested in possible art tenants, possibly a frame shop of some sort. We were approached by a bank, approached by coffee places, ice cream places," said School Construction Coordinator Susan Weisselberg. "We don't want a use that includes alcohol."

The district has yet to set rent for the site. Money generated by renting the space is intended to support Coop programs.

"We're assuming it will be taxable" and the state will not reimburse the city for construction of the retail portion of the building, said Weisselberg.

The state generally reimburses municipalities for the full cost of magnet school construction.

While there was retail space built into Hartford's Learning Corridor, the spaces were never rented and instead used for community education, including GED and ESL classes, said Roger LaFleur, director of Operations, Facilities & School Construction for the Capitol Region Education Council, which manages the Learning Corridor, a campus housing several magnet schools.

Coop's 140,000 square-foot new building, designed by renowned architect Cesar Pelli, is currently under construction, on its way to housing students next January.

During design of the school, Weisselberg said local businesses requested retail space "to keep street life going."

"The important thing about the space is it's helping to repopulate the retail landscape of College Street," said Abigail Rider, director of University Properties.

"Street level retail brings life to the street. ... Streets are not as fun to walk on where nothing is happening," she said.

Downtown retail space is tight, according to Chris Nicotra, a managing partner at Olympia Properties in New Haven.

"We need retail space, as much as possible downtown," he said. "There is very little vacancy in downtown."

While the new building consumes space once occupied by shops and restaurants, Nicotra suspected the school will still be a benefit to local business.

"It'll be a draw to the area. It's going to be this magnificent building, right downtown among the arts district," he said. "The fact they are putting retail space in the development is important. They are weaving the school into the fabric of the community."

Several downtown businesses were relocated to make way for the school, resulting in years of eminent domain battles and legal acrimony.

Image Nightclub was the last to reach an agreement with the district, accepting a \$320,000 settlement in early January. The property owner settled in April 2006 for \$1.58 million.

Villa del Sol Mexican Restaurant reached a \$32,402 settlement last year for the cost of relocation and equipment at the restaurant. The city was preparing to use eminent domain to acquire Charlie's Tire Repair on George Street, but settled with the business for \$65,000 about two years ago before resorting to the measure.

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