

# Officials Agree County Should Sell Bonny Oaks School

73-5-83 p. C1  
By Eric Kaufman  
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A preliminary report on child services for Hamilton County and its environs says Bonny Oaks School is out-of-date, and the chairman of the school's board said Friday he couldn't agree more.

"It is my dream that if we sell this land that the monies reside in a public fund in the name of Bonny Oaks to relieve some of the financial burden to the taxpayers," chairman Bryan Patten said. Patten is the grandson of Zeboim Cartter Patten, who gave the the first 70 acres to the facility for dependent children. The school gets its name from an old saying: "Bonny oaks from little acorns grow."

County Executive Dalton Roberts told reporters the \$40,000 federally funded study will be reviewed by county commissioners. He said he is considering recommending that the 317-acre property be sold for \$6 million-\$8 million. Roberts said the heart of the report recommends a "centralized" intake system for

children in Hamilton County and the surrounding area.

"Bonny Oaks must significantly change its program — at a minimum — in order to serve child-care needs," said Roberts, a member of the Bonny Oaks board.

Roberts has suggested the land be used for industrial development.

"We are both interested in improving child care in Hamilton County," Patten said, commending Roberts for his work in improving the county's child care services.

Patten, chairman of the school board for more than a year, says the agricultural lifestyle offered at Bonny Oaks "doesn't have the relevance it did in 1895" when the school was founded.

Patten said he would like to see proceeds from the sale of the property go to establish a trust fund for child care services.

"I feel very strongly that this money must go into a receptacle — a public

foundation — to provide child care in Hamilton County and the environs in the years to come," Patten said. "Make it earn interest and have a foundation board to approve funding for children."

The trust fund would also be open for future donors, Patten suggested.

"It's going to work because Dalton

Roberts is deeply committed to improving child care in Hamilton County," Patten said. "We're going to put that property back on the tax rolls."

Roberts suggested that child care here become more suited to the family structure, saying "the entire trend in child care is going to smaller institutions."

Patten agreed.

"One of the failings of Bonny Oaks is that the buildings are not designed for the family setting," Patten said. "The study identifies the need for an emergency and runaway shelter. It is my hope that the shelter will be in the name of Bonny Oaks."

Bonny Oaks now serves 38 dependent

children and at one time, according to children's services coordinator Judith Byrd, housed 170 children.

Roberts said commissioners have been looking at the report for two weeks and "We need to act on the recommendations."

Under state law, the County Commission has the power to dissolve the Bonny Oaks board. The property is deeded to Bonny Oaks school and controlled by the five-member board.

Bonny Oaks is a long-term facility for children who need time to get back into families.

"Exactly how it's going to work I don't know, but I feel very strongly we're on the right track," Patten said.

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