

# High school seeks to buy land, buildings in Fort Smith

written by Maryanne Meyerriecks |

FORT SMITH — Plans for a Catholic high school in Fort Smith moved forward Sept. 15 when the Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority approved the Fort Smith Catholic High School board to buy a small tract of land with six existing buildings in the Chaffee Crossing Historic District for \$110,000.

The FCRA approved the purchase offer in the historic barracks area along with five additional acres for future expansion. The board also requested 25 acres as donated land, but the FRCA's real estate committee altered the request, allowing the high school board the option to buy the acreage within three years at prevailing market prices.

"Our board explored many options over the past 20 months," board representative Justin Biddle said. "None of the options materialized. We felt led toward Chaffee Crossing where there was exciting growth and land enough to house a classroom building, gymnasium or event center and an outdoor athletic facility, which could include a football field."

Fort Chaffee opened in 1941 with 72,000 acres (about 112 square miles) for combat training and later was used as a German prison of war facility and Army training center. For various periods in the 1970s and 1980s the site was a relocation center for Vietnamese and Cuban refugees. In 1997 the Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority was formed to oversee more than 7,000 acres (about 10 square miles) after the Army site was officially closed. Chaffee Crossing is a neighborhood development with residential, retail and commercial areas.

The World War II barracks are well built, according to a preliminary engineer's evaluation. Biddle said the barracks, after anticipated renovations of approximately \$250,000 for each building, would allow the school to open quickly and economically in its temporary quarters as early as the fall 2018.

"The process is akin to buying a home, in this case a home for the future of Catholic-Christian high school education," Biddle said. "Now we have to order an inspection."

The additional inspections will be more comprehensive, but he hopes they will be favorable.

"Our community wants a Catholic high school and our children need it," he said.

Board representative Dan Smith said the group would like to start with 50 10th graders and add a class each year, so that as early as 2020-21 the school would have 150 students in grades 10-12.

While the board initially looked at the school being inter-parochial like Trinity Junior High School, the board now has decided the new school would be an independent high school, not under diocesan control.

The Church in Fort Smith currently educates about 1,000 students through three elementary schools serving through sixth grade and an inter-parochial junior high school for seventh,

eighth and ninth grades.

Tax-deductible donations can be sent to Fort Smith Catholic High School, P.O. Box 10612, Fort Smith, AR 72917.