

Presbyterian Seminary eyes move to old Taylors school

Seminary bursting at the seams

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Stepping carefully over a string of utility lights, Dr. Joe Pipa, president of the Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, gestures toward a now-empty room on the first floor of the former Taylors High School, where the seminary hopes to move by the end of this year.

The high-ceilinged room is where the kitchen and common areas will be when the seminary moves into the renovated building.

This month, Pipa hopes to secure a contractor, which will put the seminary one step closer to its goal. In 2003, the seminary began a capital funds campaign with the goal of raising \$3 million. Currently, the seminary has \$1.1 million in pledges and income, Pipa said. The actual renovation will cost about \$2 million. The \$3 million goal includes money that would help the school support the non-scholarship international students whose education it subsidizes. At present, the seminary and the old high school are just a quarter of a mile apart on East Main Street in Taylors.

"When we bought this building, we saw the high school and we were very interested in doing something down there, but it wasn't available," Pipa said.



The Taylors High School building, rebuilt in 1945 after the original structure burned, has been empty since the school closed in 1960. In preparation for construction, the brick structure has been gutted and the roof replaced.

Down the road at the current seminary, about 65 students are taking classes in two cramped classrooms this semester. Two of the seven faculty members share a tiny office and there are only three general-use computers. The facility, a former church, is about 11,000 square feet and doesn't meet the guidelines for the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is a problem for faculty and students with disabilities, Pipa said.

The initial plan, Pipa said, was to expand onto the seminary's current 3 1/2-acre property. The seminary purchased the building eight years ago. Former owners had made several additions, but the oldest portion is more than 80 years old.

The reasons that Pipa chose to locate the seminary in Taylors in 1998 are the same reasons he wanted the school to remain in the area. Taylors, an unincorporated clump of subdivisions and small businesses, is a closely-knit community.

In addition to having limited space, the student body is growing at about 10 to 15 percent a year and has had record enrollment the last two years, Pipa said. The old Taylors High building is 22,000 square feet. It will have 10 offices for faculty and three classrooms, each at least two times larger than the current learning spaces, Pipa said. The two-story structure will be disability friendly and be equipped with an elevator.

The seminary will add a media room, called the George Callhoun Mt. Olive Room, where audio-visual materials and equipment, including a collection of 10,000 audiotapes of sermons and lectures from the Mt. Olive Tape Library in Mississippi, can be used. The facility also will have a rare-books room.

The entire building will have the latest wireless technology, which will allow real-time video conferencing for classes. The new library will be called the Smith-Singer Library in honor of seminary founders Morton H. Smith and C. Gregg Singer.

The Taylors High School Development Corporation owns the old school property. The former owner split the property into three pieces. The seminary will be in the main building that faces Main Street. A performing arts academy will take up the other two other buildings.

Pipa said the board, which is the same as the board of the corporation, is hoping that having the corporation own the building will make it easier to attract corporate sponsorship and support, he said. Donors will be recognized through inscribed bricks and possibly room and furniture name plaques, Pipa said.

"It's the kind of thing that allows people who don't have a lot of money to get involved," he said.

Former student and current librarian Andy Wortman, who is also director of the Presbyterian Press, the school's publishing arm, said he expects the new building to foster a deeper sense of community between the already tightly-knit group of students and professors.

Pipa said that he hopes to make the school available for the public; perhaps hosting an after-school tutoring program or offering meeting places for seniors or Taylors High alumni.

The seminary began with five students in 1987, meeting at Augusta Road Presbyterian Church. It is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, both conservative denominations. It moved to its East Main Street location in 1998, shortly after Pipa became the school's first president.