



# Parker School: Questions & Answers

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**Updated June 16, 2023** This document provides answers and information in response to questions and statements from the June 8, 2023 public meeting. Additional responses and information will be added soon and there will be ongoing updates as more information becomes known. Updates and changes from previous versions will be noted.

## History of City Acquisition of the Parker School Building

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In December 2021, the City of Cortland took ownership of the former Parker Elementary School to support child care projects proposed by the Cortland YWCA and CAPCO. Since taking ownership, the partnering organizations withdrew their proposals leaving the City with a vacant building in need of repair and maintenance. Below is a timeline of significant actions relating to the City's ownership of the building and efforts to find use for it.

- June 5, 2018 – The Cortland City School District Board of Education votes to close Parker Elementary School at the end of the 2018-19 school year.
- June 19, 2018 – Mayor Tobin appoints a Parker School Task Force to “guide proper future investment.” The Mayor stated at the time that the City did not plan to purchase the building.
- June 2019 - Parker Elementary School closes due to decreased student projections and cost of building maintenance and needed renovations.
- May 22, 2019 - The YWCA and CAPCO presented plans at a public meeting for consolidated childcare services to be hosted at the site.
- June 18, 2019 – The Parker School Task Force asks the City to take ownership of the building.
- January 7, 2020 – The Common Council authorizes signing a purchase offer for the building.
- March 31, 2020 - Sale of the school building is approved by city school district voters after a public campaign by Mayor Tobin, YWCA Executive Director Kelly Tobin and Parker School Task Force members.
- June 9, 2020 – City school district voters approve a referendum to sell the building to the City of Cortland.
- October 19, 2021 – The Common Council authorizes Mayor Tobin to sign a purchase agreement for the school building and to issue an RFP to rehabilitate it for child care services.
- December 28, 2021 – Mayor Tobin signs a binding agreement to purchase the former Parker School building and for the City of Cortland to assume financial and operational responsibility for it.

- December 30, 2021 – Mayor Tobin issues an RFP for design and engineering services to rehabilitate the building for child care.
- September 28, 2022 – The YWCA and CAPCO withdraw from the project, stating the project was “financially impracticable and a questionable investment of taxpayers’ dollars.”
- December 20, 2022 – The Common Council votes 8-0 to hold a public hearing on submission of a Restore NY grant application for potential redevelopment of the former Parker School building for residential use.
- January 3, 2023 – The Common Council holds a public hearing on submission of a Restore NY grant application for potential redevelopment of the former Parker School building for residential use.
- January 17, 2023 – The Common Council votes 6-0 authorizing submission of a \$2 million Restore NY grant application for potential redevelopment of the former Parker School building for residential use.
- February 7, 2023 – The Common Council votes 8-0 authorizing Mayor Steve to issue an RFP to find new ownership and development opportunities for the former school building.
- March 29, 2023 – One proposal was received in response to the City’s RFP for ownership and development.
- May 2023 – NYS notifies the City of Cortland that it has approved the City’s \$2 million Restore NY grant application for potential redevelopment of the former Parker School building for residential use.
- June 8, 2023 – The City holds a public information meeting with a presentation by Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS) on their proposal to create “workforce housing” to meet the need for quality housing for modest-income workers, supportive housing for people with intellectual and developmental needs, and accessible units for those with mobility needs.

## Use of Parker School for Child Care or Children’s Needs

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### **Q. I support Parker School being used for child care. Why isn’t that happening?**

- A. The YWCA and CAPCO withdrew from the child care project at Parker School and no other child care agencies have come forward to take their place.

On September 22, 2022, the YWCA and CAPCO said in a press release that the project was “financially impracticable and a questionable investment of taxpayers’ dollars”. They cited reasons including inflationary pressures and steep increases in renovation and move-in costs, stresses placed on not-for-profit agencies by the COVID-19 pandemic, and shifts in demand for child care.

The City was not part of discussions about the decision. The YWCA and CAPCO informed the City after their decision to withdraw was made.

**Q. Child care is an important need for families in Cortland. Can Parker School be used by another organization to provide child care?**

- A. When the YWCA and CAPCO announced their withdrawal from the child care project, Mayor Steve was quoted at the time as saying “I as well as the Council are, and will continue to be, strong advocates for promoting and fostering accessible child care opportunities. We stand committed to exploring all options for our families who are the lifeblood of our community.”

Mayor Steve, along with Council Members Katy Silliman, Pat Lane, Mary Clare Pennello and Troy Beckwith and others has explored new possibilities for using the school building for child care. The Mayor has talked with a number of other child care organizations and larger employers about using Parker School for child care, but no partners have been found to support a child care project there.

**Q. How will we determine if child care is feasible?**

- A. That is up to child care providers to assess capacity needs and their financial and business plans. INHS can develop a space for them but there needs to be someone that wants, and is able to, operate child care in the building.

INHS can assemble funding for the construction process, design and build space for their needs, and lease the space at a below-market rate if a viable child care provider is interested.

**Q. Has the post-pandemic cost of the renovations needed for the YWCA and CAPCO child care proposal been determined?**

- A. Yes. The YWCA and CAPCO stated in September 2022 that the current projected renovation expenses were \$5.6 million which is nearly double the estimated costs prior to the pandemic. Additionally, the projected move-in costs would be 65% higher.

**Q. The Racker Center has a preschool program. Has there been any discussions about using Parker School for that?**

- A. Mayor Steve said he has talked with the Racker Center on other possibilities and that he is open to providing space for Racker’s preschool program if they are interested. INHS is open to including Racker if they are interested.

**Q. There are other service needs in the community. Can Parker be used for other children’s services?**

- A. Mayor Steve, the Common Council and INHS welcome discussions and proposals from community organizations about viable projects that would serve community needs. The City and INHS have talked with the Racker Center about use of space. Possibilities like this will continue to be explored by the City and INHS.

## City Efforts to Identify Potential Uses for the Building

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### **Q. Why was there only one proposal received in response to the RFP? Was it written in a way that only housing proposals would qualify?**

- A. No. The RFP invited proposals for any type of use. It did not exclude any purposes. The RFP is available [here](#).

The Common Council voted unanimously to issue an RFP for the ownership and development of the building on February 7, 2023 (Resolution No. 44 of 2023). In the resolution, the Council stated that the RFP should include “at a minimum, length of guaranteed ownership, resume and past projects of the proposed owners, proposed reuse of the building, potential business or residential tenants, screening process for business or residential tenants, estimated project cost of investment, potential job creation, and proposed purchase price.”

The RFP included criteria to ensure proposals submitted were viable and “consistent with and expand upon the ideas, concepts, and strategies contained with the City of Cortland [Comprehensive Plan](#).” Additionally, it said that the City is prioritizing the following:

- Projects that promote an increased quality of life and support community development and needs;
- Development designs that respect the building’s historic architecture and character of the surrounding neighborhood;
- Utilization of innovative technology for sustainable development, green construction standards, and energy efficiency;
- Engagement with the community.

## About Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS)

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### **Q. Who is Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services? What do they do?**

- A. INHS is a non-profit agency focused on expanding quality, affordable housing, preserving rather than tearing down, and creating sustainable housing that decreases energy consumption, improves health outcomes, and reduces our community’s carbon footprint. Its mission statement says it “seeks to foster communities that embrace diversity, equity, and sustainability in ways that produce lasting outcomes.”

It has a history of helping homeowners maintain or improve their homes with low-cost loans and other types of home-repair assistance, acquiring and redeveloping dilapidated rental properties, constructing new homes and rentals, and helping community members buy their first homes.

For more information about INHS and the buildings they have rehabilitated and operate as residential communities, including former school buildings, visit <https://www.ithacanhs.org>

# INHS Residential Proposal - Scope, Design & Management

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## **Q. How will INHS' proposal benefit our neighborhood?**

A. While there may be many intangible benefits over time, evident benefits include:

- The City owns a vacant building in need of costly repair and maintenance and that is also an unused community asset. The proposed project would preserve and return to purposeful use a building which is of great significance to the community.
- It would address the need for high quality rental housing that is expressly identified as a need in the City of Cortland Comprehensive Plan.
- Increase the City tax base. City property taxes would be levied on the building under INHS' residential proposal. More information about the number of units, rent and other factors will need to be known before an assessment value can be determined.
- Meeting the needs of workers who are currently living in the community but paying more than 30% of their gross income toward housing costs. Based on a sampling of Bureau of Labor statistics, typical workers who would qualify to live there include child care workers, home health aides, nursing assistants, dental assistants, janitors, retail workers, receptionists and restaurant staff, among many others.

## **Q. How many residential units are proposed?**

A. INHS included two schematic plans in the proposal it submitted - one plan is for 44 units, the other for 51 units. During their presentation and the question period, INHS said that these plans can change based on community input and whether space is reserved in the building for other purposes such as child care.

## **Q. How many people would be living there? What's the maximum?**

A. The City zoning code limits the number of people in an apartment. An apartment unit cannot have more than two people per bedroom or efficiency unit.

In the first schematic plan with 44 units, there would be 10 efficiency apartments (maximum 2 people), 22 with one bedroom (maximum 2 people) and 12 with two bedrooms (maximum four people). The maximum resident capacity in this plan would be 112 people.

In the second schematic plan with 51 units, there would be 9 efficiency apartments (maximum 2 people), 27 with one bedroom (maximum 2 people) and 15 with two bedrooms (maximum four people). The maximum resident capacity in this plan would be 132 people.

Lynn Truame, INHS Director of Real Estate Development said in response that INHS performs inspections 60 days into a lease and then annually to ensure tenants are complying with rules such as this and that the units are being well maintained.

**Q. Once INHS engages in this project, would it be in their care for 50 years?**

A. Yes. INHS would be the sole member of the Housing Development Fund Corporation (HDFC) that owns the land under the building and the sole member of the manager of the LLC that owns the improvements.

**Q. What happens if five years down the road INHS can't fill the apartments?**

A. According to INHS, a market study is prepared in advance to ensure there is existing demand for the units. No one can predict what will happen to the rental market years from now, but all INHS properties currently have waitlists.

**Q. Will INHS keep the playground?**

A. Their intention would be to preserve the playground and as much open space as possible.

**Q. What about parking? Is there space on the property to provide enough parking?**

A. The City zoning requirement is that 1.5 spaces be provided per unit of housing. As examples, a 10 unit building requires at least 15 parking spaces, a 40 unit building requires 60 parking spaces. The 1.5 spaces are not assigned to a unit, this is just the formula in the zoning code for determining the overall number of spaces required.

The proposal that INHS submitted meets that standard. INHS has said that if a child care facility were added they would have to look at how those plans need to be revised.

**Q. Is rental limited to City of Cortland residents?**

A. It is not, but based on prior experience, most residents are likely to come from Cortland or the nearby area.

**Q. What is the resident/tenant screening process?**

A. INHS has a comprehensive tenant selection policy which includes screening criteria and background checks on anyone who would be living in the apartment. According to the INHS policy, there are three prevalent considerations in the resident selection process:

- Will they/can they pay the rent?
- Will they take care of the apartment?
- Will they disturb the neighbors?

The tenant selection policy lists a number of categories and reasons to disapprove a tenant application, including:

- Record of disturbance of neighbors, destruction of property or other disruptive or dangerous behavior which adversely affects others, is disturbing or dangerous to neighbors, or disrupts household and community life.

- Non-compliance with prior rental agreements including providing shelter to unauthorized persons.

New York State does not allow blanket exclusions for past history with the exception of sexual offender status and conviction for the manufacture of methamphetamines. All other applicants must be considered for residency. They will be screened for income qualification and background checks will be conducted. An applicant can be declined on the basis of information obtained through a background check, but each applicant's particular situation must be considered individually.

No applicant will be discriminated against due to race, color, religion, sex, familial status, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, military status, marital status, lawful source of income, gender identity or expression, or creed.

For more details, see the INHS Tenant Selection Policy [here](#).

**Q. Will apartments be rented to people who are eligible for Section 8 housing vouchers?**

A. Any prospective tenant that meets the requirements of the tenant selection policy will be approved for residency. It is illegal in New York State to refuse to rent to an individual simply because they receive Section 8 assistance.

**Q. What are the checks and balances after someone moves in (e.g. to prevent too many people living or staying there or causing problems)?**

A. There will be a property manager on site 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. during the week and a 24-hour emergency number. Tenants must sign a lease agreement which outlines rules and expectations for living there. Lease violations, depending upon their severity, will result in eviction.

## Zoning, Permits and Other Approvals

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**Q. What is the zoning approval process for this project and how would you go about it?**

A. The current zoning designation for this parcel does not allow either child care or multi-family residential use. The Mayor and Common Council have held public discussions and a public hearing on the legal pathways for allowing child care and multi-family residential use which include declaration of there being a substantial public benefit by the Common Council through local law and authority of the City Planning Commission to grant a Special Use Permit. The Mayor and Common Council referred the issue to the City Planning Commission for their review and recommendation. The City Planning Commission subsequently asked the County Planning Department to weigh in on the most appropriate legal pathway.

INHS has extensive experience with municipal zoning and permit approvals and has stated that if its proposal is selected, it would meet with the City and County about this immediately. The Common Council meets twice a month and the City Planning Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals meet monthly, so it is possible for determinations to be made in a timely manner.

**Q. When I tried to put in an extension on my driveway I was required to have a certain amount of greenspace. How would INHS meet that requirement?**

This is the type of question that will be addressed as INHS further develops the plans including deciding how many units there will be. As the project goes through the zoning and permitting process, those plans may need to change further to address issues such as this.

As part of the question above, a comment was made that the property is in the flood zone. An examination of the flood zone map indicates that the walkway area to Maple Ave. and adjacency are within the 100 year flood zone, and that the remainder of the parcel is not within the flood zone.

## Neighborhood & Community Concerns

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**Q. Would this project include or result in an increase in property taxes?**

A. No. If the City sells the Parker School building to INHS, the building and property will become taxable and the City will generate tax revenue from it. More information about the number of units, rent and other factors will need to be known before an assessment value can be determined.

The City would also gain \$300,000 in revenue from the sale of the property to INHS. Additionally, the City will save a projected \$100,000 in annual maintenance costs with substantially higher costs the longer the building sits vacant.

**Q. How has development of similar modest-income or workforce housing effected area home valuation?**

A. Studies indicate there has not been substantial increase or decrease to area home values from affordable housing development. For more information, read [this](#) Bloomberg News article.

**Q. Will INHS be paying taxes? Will there be any PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) programs?**

A. If the City accepts INHS' proposal and sells the property to them, INHS would pay City property taxes based on the assessed value of the property when the project is complete. More details will need to be known before an assessment value can be determined.

In response to the question, Lynn Truame, INHS Director of Real Estate Development said it is uncertain whether the project might need to seek a PILOT agreement with the City. It would be up to the Common Council to approve or deny any such request.

**Q. My home borders the property and I am concerned about noise and other disruptions that might come from an apartment building. Can you buffer the noise and lights from the parking area as well as the overall noise lights and disturbances?**

A. Yes. INHS will meet with neighbors to discuss and address their concerns. This is part of the community engagement the City requires in the RFP process and which INHS has done with all projects like this.



Additionally, as part of the zoning and permit process, the City Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) and Planning Commission can, and often do, require specific actions to mitigate noise, lighting and privacy concerns. When the ZBA and Planning Commission consider whether to approve site plans, variances and permits, neighbors within 500 feet of the property are notified by mail about the matter, and a public hearing is held during which anyone wishing to ask questions or state their concerns is invited to speak.

**Q. Can INHS impose a curfew for tenants?**

A. Although a curfew for tenants cannot be imposed by the landlord, the City has a noise ordinance in effect from 11:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. As noted to the question above, INHS will meet with neighbors to discuss and address their concerns, and the zoning and permit process can address noise, lighting and privacy concerns.

## Funding & Financing

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**Q. What is the Restore NY Grant intended to fund?**

A. The Restore New York Communities Initiative provides funding to municipalities for revitalization of commercial and residential properties, encouraging community development and neighborhood growth through the elimination and redevelopment of vacant structures. A public hearing was held on January 3, 2023 to receive comments on the submission of an application for a \$2 million Restore NY grant to facilitate the renovation of the former Parker School building for residential use. The Common Council unanimously approved the request to submit an application on January 17, 2023. The City was notified in May 2023 that the grant was funded.

**Q. What happened to all the grant funding that was supposed to renovate the school for child care? Is it still available to be used for child care? Can it be used for another purpose?**

During the period of time that the YWCA, CAPCO and the City of Cortland made plans for the City to purchase Parker School as space for the YWCA and CAPCO to provide child care, grants and other funding sources were announced or pledged through NYS Empire State Development (\$500,000), former Assemblywoman Lifton (\$600,000), and Assembly Speaker Heastie (\$500,000).

Differing statements and claims have been made about the availability of these funds and what the stipulations are. The City will seek a formal response from Empire State Development and the City's current Assembly representative, Assemblywoman Kelles.

**Q. Is INHS willing to partially subsidize childcare?**

A. Lynne Truame said in response to the question that INHS can apply for funding that is specific to the childcare space as part of its application for funding for the housing portion of the project.

**Q. What is the status of the DASNY bonds?**

A. Prior to the purchase of the building, the Dormitory Authority of NYS (DASNY) had a lien on the property which the City inherited with the purchase of the property. Research and discussion on this matter began in 2022 and continues with the assistance of the City’s bond counsel. Future updates will be provided to Common Council and the public.

**Q. What has been spent to date on maintaining the Parker School building in its vacant status?**

A. In May 2022, the City began tracking utility and maintenance costs for the building. Since that time, costs total \$89,781.97 and include the payment of insurance for the property, an adequate alarm system, required annual fire inspections and electric utilities.

## Decision Process, Public Information & Input

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**Q. How have decisions been made about Parker School? Who has made those decisions?**

A. The Common Council has made decisions about the City’s involvement with Parker School. They have considered recommendations from individuals, community organizations and two advisory committees appointed to pursue the best use of the building. Below are some key decisions made by the Common Council:

- January 7, 2020 – The Council votes 8-0 authorizing Mayor Tobin to sign a purchase offer for Parker School. Further action on this and other project planning was delayed during the pandemic.
- October 19, 2021 – The Council votes 6-2 authorizing Mayor Tobin to sign a purchase agreement for the building, and votes 7-1 to issue an RFP to rehabilitate it for child care services.
- December 20, 2022 – The Council votes 8-0 to set a public hearing on submission of a \$2 million Restore NY grant application for potential redevelopment of the former Parker School building for residential use.
- January 3, 2023 – The Council holds a public hearing on submission of a Restore NY grant application for potential redevelopment of the former Parker School building for residential use.
- January 17, 2023 – The Council votes 6-0 authorizing submission of a Restore NY grant application in the amount of \$2 million for potential redevelopment of the former Parker School building for residential use.
- February 7, 2023 – The Council votes 8-0 authorizing Mayor Steve to issue an RFP to find new ownership and development opportunities for the former school building.

## Additional Questions

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**Q. Has INHS ever worked with Community Land Trusts?**

A. INHS has a community housing trust for the development of affordable for-sale homes, but the renovation of the Parker School would be a rental project funded with Low Income Housing Tax Credits, which requires a specific legal structure. The underlying land would be owned by a Housing Development Fund Corporation, a non-profit entity established for this project.

**Q. Is housing the only option for a land trust? Or could a school be owned by a community and be part of a land trust?**

A. Further research is needed to provide an answer to this question.

**Q. I read on social media that Parker School is going to be used for student housing. Is this true?**

A. No, this is not true. The Mayor nor any Common Council members have made any proposal for student housing, and the City has not received any such proposal.

**Q. I read on social media that the Mayor wants to sell the building to a commercial developer who will make money renting apartments. Is this true?**

A. No. There are no plans or proposals to sell the school building to a commercial developer of any kind. The Mayor has asked the Parker School Advisory Committee members Katy Silliman, Pat Lane, Mary Clare Pennello and Troy Beckwith to make recommendations about what's best for the neighborhood and community. They have recommended learning more about a proposal from a local non-profit agency, Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS), which has been recognized nationally for its best practices in the affordable housing field.

## Updates and Forthcoming Answers

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There will be ongoing updates to this document to address questions not yet answered, future questions raised, and as information becomes known. Updates and changes from previous versions will be noted.

Additional questions, comments and responses have been transcribed from audio recording of the meeting. Information which will be added soon will address questions related to:

- Environmental, energy and sustainability plans for the building.
- Construction and mitigating noise and disturbance
- Timeline on decisions about the proposal
- Additional questions extracted from audio transcript