

News

Cass Board hosts final tour of AGC campus

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Despite knowing that the former Ah-Gwah-Ching (AGC) State Hospital near Walker no longer exists, it's a jolt to see what remains at the site.

Which is basically ... nothing.

AGC's familiar, multi-story brick buildings that once housed thousands of residents, treatment services and administrative offices are gone. So are garages, maintenance shops and the heating plant. No parking lots. No outlying structures, except for one stone gazebo referred to as "the bus stop."

Lots of grass, mature trees and a few shrubs remain, though. And two inquisitive deer that stared at a bus bringing about 20 visitors Nov. 9 for a drive-through tour.

This is all that's left of Ah-Gwah-Ching, the sprawling state-run facility that began life as a tuberculosis sanatorium at the end of the 19th century and ended its 100-year run as a state nursing home when it closed in 2008.

With demolition and rehab work now finished, Cass County commissioners and other county officials joined representatives from the city of Walker and Shingobee Township, Dist. 4B State Rep. Larry Howes and Dist 4 State Sen.-elect John Carlson for a final visit to AGC.

In 2008, when the state of Minnesota finally closed AGC, Cass County negotiated for state funding through bonding and grants to pay to rehab the campus for eventual redevelopment.

"When the state left in 2008, AGC's payroll, at its lowest, was \$11 million per year," County Administrator Bob Yochum stated. Rehabbing the campus for future use was critical to someday restoring that economic loss.

Of the original 171 acres, the state kept 55 acres, now offered for sale at the appraised value of \$340,000 (no takers so far).

About 60 acres was turned over to Cass County for a token \$1. Plans initially were to use about 30 acres for a future health care facility and the rest for a future Cass County government center. Both ideas are on hold indefinitely, due to the current economic climate.

The remaining 50 acres with one-quarter mile of shoreline on Pumphouse Bay of Leech Lake, was turned over to the Department of Natural Resources for a wildlife management area.

Throughout 2008 and 2009, the campus was the scene of constant building demolition, hazardous material abatement, and brick and concrete reclamation, as contractors tore down buildings, recycled stone, brick and metal and prepared the site for reuse.

Yochum estimated that Cass County ultimately managed 250,000 square feet of building abatement.

Not everything was straightforward. Among the unexpected finds was a 660-foot long underground walking tunnel that had been collapsed and buried decades ago.

"That was the first major one we didn't know about," remarked Chief Financial Officer Larry Wolfe. Other finds included several underground utility chases with concrete and asbestos. Each one added to demo and abatement costs.

At one time, the AGC campus had its own farm, where TB patients who were able to work helped raise produce, farm animals and dairy products to feed patients and staff. The old farmsite contained plenty of farm equipment and building



A stone gazebo, referred to as "the bus stop," is the only structure left at the Ah-Gwah-Ching campus that Cass County Commissioners recently toured. Photo by Gail DeBoer

debris, plus some well-aged, still-fragrant manure.

After a reuse study found that the campus water tower could only produce pressure of 28 psi, a second water tower became part of the project, built alongside Walker's existing water tower. Upgrading the old AGC tower and water system would have cost much more than installing a new one. With or without redevelopment at AGC, the second tower now provides additional fire protection and water capacity to Walker, especially in the summer.

New water lines were also run between AGC and Walker, along the path of the existing sewer line easement. Walker's sewer ponds border the AGC campus.

Now Cass County's job overseeing contracts is done, and the AGC project is concluded. The reason for the trip, Yochum said, "is to celebrate the conclusion of the grants. We own the property, and the board has asked the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) ... to market the property in the future."

EDC Director Gail Leverson remarked that it showed vision and courage on Cass County's part to bring the campus to this point.

"We will continue to show the site to any potential candidates," she declared. Having the infrastructure in place will certainly help."

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