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## Fairview School becomes rec center in August

By Lane Kelley

Staff writer

Fairview School will end its last year as a public elementary in June and re-open in August as the new recreation center for the Darien Park District, officials said Tuesday.

The announcement ends a year of speculation on how the Park District will solve its need for additional recreational space after several ideas were floated by the Park Board.

District 61 Superintendent Warren "Chip" Johnson said he's relieved to have found a buyer for Fairview, which the School District decided to close last summer as part of a move to grade-level-center schools.

"We feel very good about it, and we feel good for the School District, for the park district and for the city of Darien," Johnson said.

A referendum question posing a tax increase for District 61 lost by a wide margin in November. Some voters thought the sale of Fairview would be a shot in the arm financially for the district, which is in its fifth year of deficit spending.

But Johnson said Fairview sale proceeds would not be used for operating funds but to renovate the other two buildings, Lace and Mark DeLay schools.

The School Board first put a \$7.25 million price on the school at 7301 Fairview Ave. late last year, then lowered it to \$5.1 million when there were no takers. No bidders came forward at the lower price either, though a Muslim group offered \$4 million.

Park Board Commissioner Dick Simester said he's always been a fan of buying Fairview, though the board has floated other ideas in recent months, such as building a new rec center at Westwood Park, adjacent to Fairview.

But that would cost too much. At the Jan. 22 Park Board meeting, Executive Director Stephanie Gurgone told commissioners that a new recreation center would run \$8 million to \$10 million. Remodeling and updating Marion Hills would cost \$4.6 million, she said.

The present Marion Hills Recreation Center, 133 Plainfield Road, originally was a District 61 school until it was sold to the Darien Park District in 1993.

The Park Board will officially vote on buying Fairview at its Monday, Feb. 12, meeting, Gurgone said.

Parks Commissioner Shari Gillespie agreed with Simester that buying

Fairview makes more sense. "We'd be silly at this point to pass it up," Gillespie said.

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