

# Ignoring history

## **THE ISSUE** Birmingham Mayor William Bell should make determining what to do with our old, historic structures a higher priority.

**T**he fire that practically destroyed historic Powell School two weeks ago is sad in many ways. City officials are trying to determine whether even the shell of Birmingham's oldest public school can be saved.

Too often, we see our city's historically valuable structures — Terminal Station comes to mind — disappear or be left to neglect and ruin. Powell School, built in 1887, was closed as a school a decade ago; while city officials had discussed various possible uses for the structure, it remained mostly unused for the past 10 years.

As such, it attracted vandals and vagrants. While the cause of the fire is being investigated, Birmingham Fire Department officials said there were reports of homeless people in the building before or at the time of the fire, which officials said started on the third floor.

Birmingham Mayor William Bell has asked Birmingham police to make extra checks at vacant city-owned properties, but there's no way the Police Department, with too much work already, can keep people from entering vacant buildings 100 percent of the time.

What the city needs is a better plan to deal with buildings that are no longer in use.

With the overbuilt Birmingham city school system facing deep budget cuts, there are likely to be more school closings and consolidations. Some old schools revert back to city ownership. Others stay in

the possession of the school system. It's sometimes difficult to determine clear ownership of older buildings.

Still, there must be a more aggressive plan to deal with vacant buildings.

Those structures that should be saved for their historic value — such as Powell Elementary — need a quick plan for reuse or restoration. Buildings that have no significant historic value should be demolished as quickly as possible.

As devastating as it is for a community to lose a school, it's a blight on a neighborhood for that empty school to just sit there, a worn reminder of what the neighborhood lost. Abandoned buildings are magnets for vagrants, drug users and vandals, as well. They also are expensive to maintain, even if they aren't in use. Somebody has to keep the grounds at least minimally in order. As windows and doors are broken, they must either be replaced or, worse, boarded up, adding to the blighted appearance.

City leaders often are too slow to act to reuse or demolish old properties. For example, there have been various plans to use the historic Elyton School, which was closed in 2003. But politics and priorities keep getting in the way, and the building sits unused and vacant.

We find merit in Councilwoman Carole Smitherman's idea of setting up a committee or organization to review the empty schools and other vacant buildings in Birmingham and determine whether they can be saved, how they should be used or whether they should be demolished.

Such a city initiative is badly needed, and Bell should make this a priority. If he does, it will get done.