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Neighborhood school faces budget ax today

By Jim Totten
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Since 1951, Lindbom Elementary School has been the classic neighborhood school.

"It's the school of the 'hood," Brighton business owner Mark Binkley affectionately called it.

It's surrounded by homes. Many children walk to the school or stroll to the local police or fire stations for field trips. It's built solidly and features large classrooms, and many local officials and businesspeople have sent their children to the school.

After the closing of the all-kindergarten Miller school last year, Lindbom is the only elementary school in the city of Brighton and the only public school in the downtown area.

Despite all these amenities, the Brighton Area Schools Board of Education will likely vote tonight to close the school next year as it faces declining enrollment and a financial crisis.

School administrators have recommended closing Lindbom — instead of one of the other four elementary schools — because it would be the least disruptive due in large part to its central location. The move will save \$2 million for the district, which is looking at slashing its budget by \$14.8 million to address a projected \$15 million shortfall by June 2011.

The board will vote on closing an elementary school at 7 p.m. today at the Brighton Education Community Center, 125 S. Church St. in Brighton.

Superintendent Greg Gray said he doesn't look forward to this decision.

"We don't want to do this; we have to do this," Gray said of closing an elementary school.

The district lost nearly 400 students this year and has 500 open seats among its five elementary schools.

Binkley, co-owner of Cooper & Binkley Jewelers in downtown Brighton, said both of his sons attended Lindbom.

"The fabric of the downtown is going to be different," Binkley said of the city in the wake of the possible Lindbom closure.

He said a "little bit of small-town Americana" will be lost when there will no longer be children walking to school, no more crossing guards and no children walking through town for field trips.

While he has an emotional attachment to Lindbom, Binkley recognizes why the school is looking to close a school.

"The school board has an awful lot of tough choices," he said. "I don't envy them at all."

Binkley hopes the school will be reopened when the economy turns around.

Brighton Mayor Ricci Bandkau and her husband, Don, attended Lindbom back in the 1950s. Their two daughters attended the school in the late 1970s.

"We had such good memories there," she said.

The City Council sent a letter to the school board outlining the benefits of having an elementary school in the city.

"I think it's going to be a sad day when they close it," Bandkau said.

She said a school in the city has so much to offer as far as field trips, history and arts.

Bill Anderson, school board president, said all of his children attended Lindbom. As a local banker, he has enjoyed watching some classes walk by his office on Second Street as they go on field trips or even stopped in to see the bank's vault.

While he doesn't want to see Lindbom closed, Anderson said he will definitely support closing an elementary school to deal with the district's deficit.

Anderson, who has served eight years on the board, will oversee his last meeting Monday. He decided not to run for re-election this year.

He said his last meeting will be difficult.

"I could well be seeing the closing of my own neighborhood school," he said.

Contact Daily Press & Argus reporter Jim Totten at (517) 548-7088 or at jtotten@gannett.com.
