

Boonville transforms former Kemper Military School campus

By Emily Kummerfeld

Boonville, Missouri is a vibrant tourist destination. Attractions like the Isle of Capri Casino and the Warm Springs Ranch, home of the Budweiser Clydesdales, draw thousands of visitors to the small city on the Missouri River.

A century ago, however, Boonville was well known for its higher education.

Since 1844, Boonville had been home to the Kemper Military School. It was forced to close due to low enrollment in 2002. Many citizens felt the loss.

"We sort of lost our identity," said Kate Fjell, assistant to the city's administrator. "For a lot of people, Kemper is what Boonville was associated with."

The city of Boonville purchased the property for \$500,000, hoping another entity would purchase the entire campus. After many years of waiting, people realized the city would have to focus on renovating each building one at a time.

"That's about all the city has the financial resources to handle," said Fjell.

Although closed, the campus maintained a presence in the Boonville community. The Boonslick Heartland YMCA was already housed on the Kemper grounds. It moved into the Johnson Fieldhouse, the former gymnasium and shooting range in 2000 before the school closed.

"When we do renovations in there and fix things up, we'll find old case shellings from the firing range," said CEO Matt Schneringer. "But it serves our needs, it serves the needs of the Boonville Community."

The Kemper campus is also a rich source of local folklore. Mary Barile, a writer and storyteller from Boonville, recalled one legend of a murder victim from the 1980s who can be seen running on the jogging track late at night.

"I've had several people tell me they've experienced it, and they didn't realize what they were seeing until they went back and realized nobody was there," said Barile. There have been reports of more hauntings on campus as well.

Use of the old campus grew with the city's partnership with State Fair Community College. The college first moved into the Library Learning Center building, right before the school closed. When the college wanted to expand, a federal grant from the Economic Development Administration allowed renovation of the Science Hall building.

Some structures, like the iconic Kemper Administration building, were contaminated and beyond the possibility of renovation. But in order to begin the expensive cleanup, Boonville needed help.

Like an estimated 450,000 other sites in the United States, the Kemper Administration building was considered a "brownfield," or a site whose development is complicated by some type of real or possible contamination.

"It's just that there's a stigma associated with that property. There's something wrong with it. That's the definition of a brownfield," said Christine O'Keefe, environmental specialist with the Department of Natural Resources and case manager of brownfield sites. "As long as that stigma is there, then people don't want to approach the property and buy it."

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources oversees brownfield cleanup and redevelopment through the Brownfields/Voluntary Cleanup Program. A certificate of completion is issued to the site after cleanup meets state standards.

To spur initiative for developers to clean up sites, the Missouri Department of Economic Development began the Brownfield Remediation Program, which issues tax credits for up to 100 percent for the remediation costs of a brownfield site. The Kemper building fulfilled the requirements for acceptance by the BVCP, but it was not eligible for the remediation program.

But the Kemper site was eligible for other state programs and Boonville would not be left alone to manage the cost. The Environmental Improvement and Energy Resources Authority gives assistance for brownfield cleanups through the Missouri Brownfield Revolving Loan Fund.

"We try to clean up sites that probably wouldn't be cleaned up unless it were for our involvement," EIERA director Kristin Tipton said.

The maximum grant the EIERA can issue is \$200,000. It has its own requirements, which rely heavily on who owns the property. One stipulation of assistance is oversight of the cleanup through the BVCP.

Programs like the Missouri Brownfield Revolving Loan Fund are critical as often cleanup in rural communities is more challenging, said Pat Curry, project manager in the Extension Community Economic and Entrepreneurial Development (ExCEED) program with the University of Missouri Extension.

"They've got a serious resource problem in many rural places when they're dealing with things like brownfields," he said. "So often brownfields just sit in rural communities for long periods of time, sometimes decades, with no remediation at all."

Boonville successfully applied to the EIERA for funds to get rid of the asbestos in the Kemper Administration building. The building was later torn down after the city's assessment that it was beyond further renovation.

"It was the most iconic, so it was a really hard decision for us to do," Fjell said.

Boonville plans to turn the site into a park with historical markers of Kemper Military School and the administration site.

The city is now in the process of removing contamination in the Kemper K Barracks building. The building has been accepted into BVCP and is currently receiving bids for a contractor to remove the asbestos. So far the estimates are over \$400,000, but with assistance from the EIERA, the city can cover the rest of the cost and proceed with its plans to turn the site into green space for the park.

"The city does take our historic preservation and our legacy very seriously, so we're committed to keeping Kemper," Fjell said. "We want to rehab it, and we can."

And with assistance from state resources, small communities in Missouri have the prospect of transforming their towns. Some, like Boonville, also have the chance to preserve their past.