Sacred preservation

Project will renovate Academy of Sacred Heart

Todd Billiot
Staff Writer

GRAND COTEAU — A $10 million capital fund-raising campaign is under way to renovate the Academy of the Sacred Heart, said to construct new buildings to expand the school.

The immediate goal of Coteau 2001 is to raise $2 million to add a sprinkler system and raise the school’s third and fourth floors, said Babette McHardy, the school’s development director.

Kris Wartelle, president of the parents association and chairperson of the Coteau 2001 campaign, said all school parents and alumnae have contributed all that they can to the campaign. So far, $760,000 in cash and pledges have been raised for fire safety and third and fourth floor improvement projects.

McHardy said the school’s primary sources of financial support for its operation and maintenance are from tuition and fund-raisers. McHardy said it does not receive significant financial support from the Diocese of Lafayette or the state Department of Education, she said. Yet 90 percent of its students attend college, with many on scholarship to Ivy League universities of the northeast.

Reasons to renovate the school go beyond the interests of parents, alumnae and the pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade students, Wartelle said.

This 1830s-vintage building of the historically significant Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau is scheduled for renovation with a $10 million capital campaign now under way.

Anyone interested in historic building preservation, Civil War history, tourism, religious and educational traditions, and a Vatican-sanctioned miracle site, can contribute to Coteau 2001, as the capital campaign is called.

"This is a historical site," Wartelle said on a recent visit to the school with a team of Coteau 2001 supporters. "It’s bigger than the school. It’s like a jewel in the middle of nowhere."

"Yet, we’re known around the world," said Jan Swift, a parent and member of the school’s board of trustees.

Among the convents of the Sacred Heart throughout the world — 218 houses in five continents — the Academy of the Sacred Heart in this picturesque St. Landry Parish town has been in continuous existence the longest — since 1831.

The oldest existing building, constructed in 1831, is a four-story cypress wood and red brick school comprised of a maze of classrooms, stairwells and hallways. It also has a chapel, dining hall and student study area, and a shrine to St. John Berchmans, where a miracle was said to have occurred.

Built by slaves from bricks crafted on site, the building is similar in style to other grand houses of the same vintage in Acadiana, such as Chretien Point in Sunset and Shadows on the Teche in New Iberia.

Additions were made to the Academy’s boarding and day school in 1958-60, 1949 and 1970. The galleries in front of the school were renovated about two years ago.

As with past construction work, all of the new work will be done with an awareness to keep the school’s historic purity, Swift said.

"This capital campaign will ensure the continued longevity of the building," Swift said.

To help support the school’s capital campaign, call 963-5735.