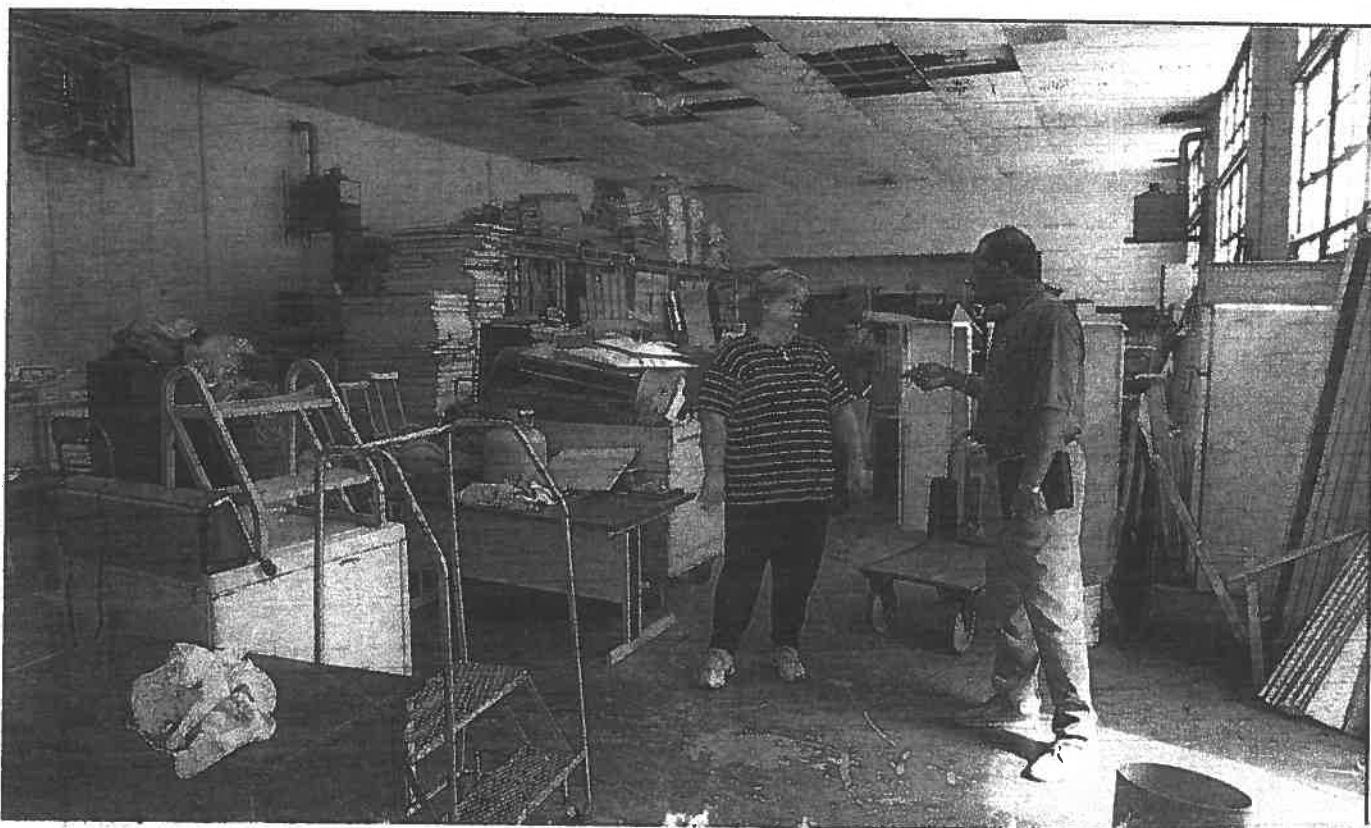


Seeing the big picture



Green Cove Springs City Councilman Matthew Tinney Jr. and Colleen Casterline, services director of Clay County Adult Rehabilitation Inc., are trying to renovate the auditorium at the old Dunbar High School and turn it into a community center. — Reggie Jarrett/special

Green Cove councilman has plans for old auditorium

By Beth Reese Cravey
County Line staff writer

GREEN COVE SPRINGS — Matthew Tinney Jr. excitedly strode into the old building on Middleburg Avenue, then looked around appreciatively, even fondly.

To the unenlightened eye, it appeared to be an old warehouse, full of abandoned items destined for a garage sale, if not the landfill.

But that's not what Tinney saw.

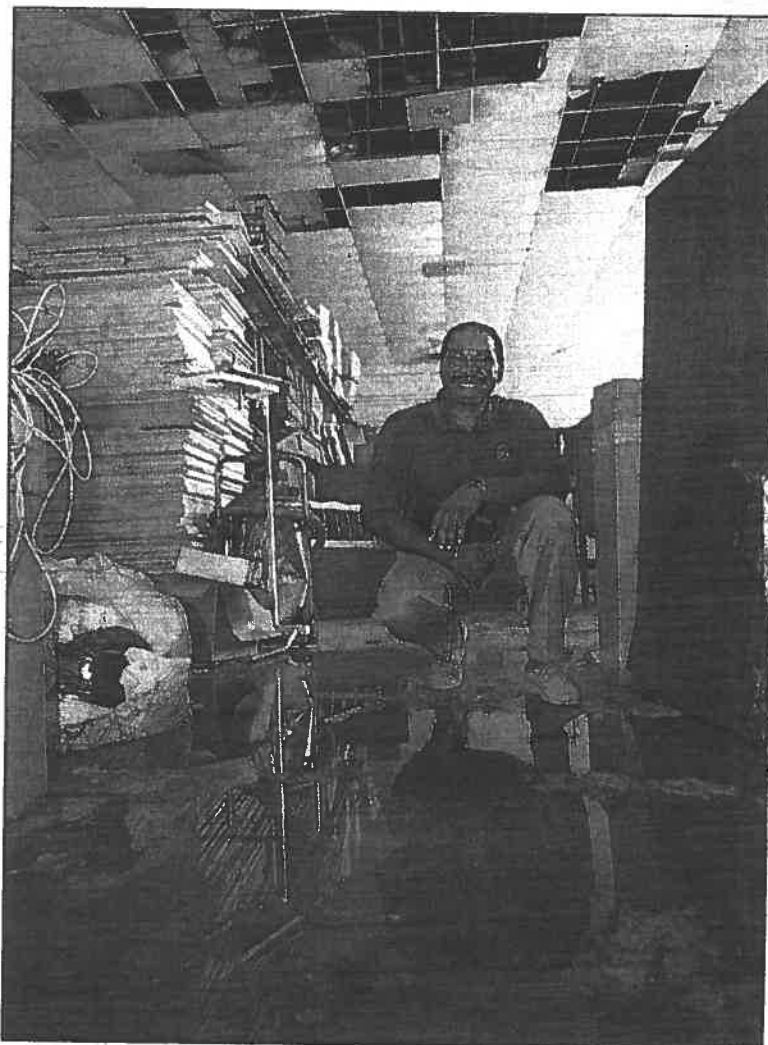
He saw what it was in his youth — the T.R. Marie Auditorium, part of the old Dunbar High School, which he attended — and what it could be again.

He saw student drama clubs performing plays. He saw concerts, family reunions, even business conferences. He saw a community center that so strengthened the surrounding neighborhood that it pushed away the drug dealers who currently hang out on some of its street corners.

"I couldn't even see the junk. I saw plays on that stage," he said. "That's the kind of vision that I have. I look through the junk and see the possibility."

Tinney, 50, is a community activist-turned City Council member, the first black council member in Green Cove Springs since the 1970s. He parlayed the presidency of a citizens group that he helped found, Parents Working for Community Involvement and Development, into a council seat in 1997.

In the final year of his first term — he is up for re-election in the spring of 2001 — Tinney was recently named by the council to be vice mayor, the traditional stepping-stone to mayor. He attained the leadership position a year later than he hoped. He walked out of a 1999 council



Green Cove Springs City Councilman Matthew Tinney Jr. is trying to renovate an old high school auditorium and make it into a community center. The auditorium has been used as a storage facility for years and a leaking roof leaves puddles on the floor. — Reggie Jarrett/special

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meeting because he believed he had been unfairly passed over for the position at that time.

Becoming vice mayor coincided with changes at his Jacksonville computer company job that allowed him to do much of his work at home. Less commuting time means more community time, more time to flex his newfound political muscle, and Tinney is making the most of the opportunity.

At a council meeting last month, he publicly blasted the city and its police department for ongoing drug activity in the Middleburg Avenue area, near where he lives.

"It's ridiculous! Enough is enough," he said. "We should not tolerate it. Zero tolerance!"

Also, Tinney is working closely with Clay County Adult Rehabilitation Inc., which owns the old Dunbar High complex, to raise funds to renovate the building into that dreamed-of community center.

"I envision it done, bringing people in," he said. "It could open up a whole host of things. ... It is so exciting! Thinking about the possibilities."

In addition, he has allied himself with a citizens committee appointed to make recommendations to the council on the fate of the Qui-Si-Sana, a historic but decrepit hotel the city hopes can be restored as a downtown landmark. He has attended committee meetings, toured the hotel with panel members and urged them to consider the "big picture" of city revitalization as they deliberate.

In Tinney's mind's eye, the big picture always hovers. All the possibilities he sees — if they become realities — would together create a revitalized Green Cove Springs, brimming with economic and job opportunities.

"Look at the big picture. I always saw so much potential in our city, but we never did anything about it," he said. "We've just got to do some creative thinking."

Like selling junk to make a

indeed try to sell the junk in the auditorium at a large garage sale; proceeds would be used as matching funds for grants.

Of all his current projects, the auditorium is clearly the one closest to Tinney's heart. It pains him that the drug dealers he complained about when he first took office remain a problem in the Middleburg Avenue area, within earshot of youth who participate in Clay County Police Athletic League after-school and summer programs in the CCAR complex.

"This I've got to preach on," he said. "For a small city, we're talking about several blocks of activity ... At the PAL, we have little kids, [and we are trying to] teach them to be good citizens. You look at the next street over, a block around the complex ... This is what they witness."

He talks of walking on the field outside the PAL gymnasium, picking up "crack bags."

"We all have to be concerned that we're not doing enough. We have the same problem year in and year out," Tinney said. "I don't think it is fair to the people who live in the neighborhood. ... We need such a [police] presence that the [drug] customers are afraid to come."

Police Chief Gail Russell bristled at Tinney's comments. He said police have ongoing anti-drug efforts in that area and, among other efforts, arrested 31 people in a recent drug bust there, he said.

"It is a continuous thing," Russell said. "We have had improvements ... There is a lot less than there used to be."

But not enough so that Middleburg Avenue area residents feel safe enough to take a walk down their own street, Tinney said.

"I live it," he said. "I live it."

Some council members said the police department was doing all it can; illegal drug sales are a growing problem in cities across the nation, they said. But other members supported Tinney's remarks.

"We do keep talking about it, but we don't do enough. ... We have to get more involved," said Mayor Jerry Williams. "Mat-

He sees it every day."

People who live and work in the Middleburg Avenue area also see it every day.

A resident who ventured out onto his porch one recent morning said he and his neighbors are worried about what they see happening in the community, as they watch drug dealers and police come and go. But they appreciate Tinney's efforts to increase police pressure — and his dreams for the community's future, he said.

"It can help, but only if the [the police] keep it up. We need them out here all the live-long time," said the man, who declined to give his name for fear of reprisals from drug dealers. "Remember when this place was hopping, but not with dealers."

Colleen Casterline, service director for CCAR, and Nancy Keating, executive director of the agency, accompanied Tinney on a recent visit to the auditorium. They said they share his vision for its future.

"I see kids just hanging around; they don't have any place to go," Casterline said.

A community center would give them that place to go and replace the street-corner drug dealing with productive community activity, she said.

Keating said she has confidence it will happen, with the help of Tinney's determination. "It's about trust, faith and having the same vision," she said. "You have to believe in each other."

And anything that improves one part of Green Cove Spring whether it's a restored downtown hotel or a community center in a nearby neighborhood will improve the city as a whole, Tinney said. Combining revitalized downtown and neighborhood areas with the natural beauty of the St. Johns River and adjacent Spring Park would make Green Cove Springs ripe for economic development, he said.

"Those assets will attract people to the city, which will in turn attract ... business," he said. "Just think ... what do we have to do to make these people come to Green Cove Springs?"

"Now is the time for us