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Former Topsail school earns achievement award

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HAMPSTEAD | Little more than an eyesore for most of the last decade, the former Topsail Consolidated School on U.S. 17 in Hampstead opened as a county office building last fall following a \$4.2 million renovation.

On Thursday, the building earned a Significant Achievement Award from the Lower Cape Fear Stewardship Development Coalition, presented at an awards luncheon at the Terraces on Sir Tyler in Wilmington.

The annex shared the spotlight with the Hackney Dental Office in Wilmington and Westgate Nature Park in Leland. In a second category, Outstanding Stewardship Awards went to Cape Fear Community College's Union Station in Wilmington and to River Bluffs subdivision in Castle Hayne.

The projects were judged on their overall creativity, design and environmental impact. Criteria include site development, water-quality protection, use of "green" materials, wetland and habitat protection, community outreach and reuse or revitalization of existing sites.

"It has been a community landmark for so many years, and we have been able to restore it as a focal point of the community," Pender planning director Kyle Breuer said of the old Topsail school.

The former school was built in 1924, originally housing grades one through 12. It became one of the area's first integrated high schools before becoming a middle school that remained in use until the mid-1990s. It was used for Cape Fear Community College classes for several years before falling into disrepair and eventually finding a place on the Historic Wilmington Foundation's list of Most Threatened Places in the region in 2011.

"I don't think generally that it's government's role to just go out and start being historic preservation people, but this was a win-win for everybody," County Commissioners Chairman David Williams said while construction was in progress last summer, referencing the board's decision to fund the project. "It is the centerpiece of the community, and there has been a lot of excitement in a lot of different groups" about its renovation, he added.

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