

Palin opens new White Cliff



Dawson Construction CFO Michael Bayless, left, Gov. Sarah Palin and Ketchikan Gateway Borough Mayor Dave Kiffer celebrate the moment Monday after cutting the ribbon for the new borough office building in the old White Cliff school. Staff photo by Hall Anderson

Governor visits briefly for ribbon cutting, bill signing

By **ANDREW DAMSTEDT**
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Former White Cliff Elementary School students and teachers Monday saw how their former school had been transformed into new government offices.

"It's different," many of the students said as they walked the halls they were last in as kindergartners and first-graders in 2004.

More specifically, Fawn Mountain Elementary School sixth-grader Christopher Llanos said the gym was what he thought had changed the most.

"The whole gym changed, the bottom part is different and the top part is different," he said.

The Ketchikan Gateway Borough planning department now occupies the former gym.

The tour was part of the borough's open house Monday, complete with a ribbon-cutting ceremony by Gov. Sarah Palin.

"Are you skipping school?" Palin asked the students, to which she received a resounding yes.



Fawn Mountain Elementary School students toured the renovated White Cliff Monday. From left are Lora Starr, Mackenzie Hancock in red, Principal Barb Roberts, Kathleen Chaudhary, Jolene Ginther and Jacob Avila. Staff photo by Tom Miller

Palin told the students that her budget director, Karen Rehfeld, and deputy chief of staff, Randy Ruaro,

went to school at White Cliff.

"It's pretty historical, really," Palin said, standing on the front steps of

the building.

The borough moved into the White Cliff building in February after Dawson Construction completed the renovation.

"We're here to celebrate the transformation of the old school," Palin said.

She said the renovation work by Dawson Construction showed the "true Alaskan spirit.

"You're looking sharp with your Carhartts and steel-toed boots," she said of the construction crew, several standing across First Avenue in hard hats.

Palin encouraged the students to think of blue-collar jobs as careers because of the many benefits those jobs provide to the state.

"It's a beautiful building that has one of the most beautiful views in Alaska," Palin said of White Cliff.

With a pair of large scissors, Palin cut the three ribbons with Borough Mayor Dave Kiffer and Dawson Construction's chief financial officer, Mike Bayless.

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Bayless presented the governor with a tool box and a baby bodysuit with "Dawson" printed on it for her youngest son, Trig Palin.

Bayless commended his crew, the borough and all the subcontractors who worked on the project, which was completed in seven months.

"I think it's a great example of a public-private venture," Bayless said.

The borough sold the building to Dawson Construction for \$500,000 in September 2007. That sale was finalized in June 2008 after the borough agreed to lease office space in a renovated building.

The borough is seeking \$9.47 million from the state to purchase the building. The borough leases a portion of the building from Dawson Construction for \$41,260 per month for a minimum of 10 years.

After the school was closed in 2004, Kiffer said "no one knew what to do" and thought the building was "dead" after a proposal to turn the building into an arts/senior citizens center failed.

Kiffer said it was thanks to efforts by local citizens that a new use was found for the building.

"It's going to have another 80 years," Kiffer said.

Barb Roberts, Fawn Mountain principal, was the last principal at White Cliff Elementary School.

"I think it's beautiful," Roberts said.

Roberts pointed out where everything had been in the old school — gyms, classrooms, offices to a group of sixth graders on a tour led by legal secretary Cindy Montgomery.

The students got a lesson from Borough Attorney Scott Brandt-Erichsen as he explained how the magnetic suspension horizontal rotor sitting on his desk worked.

"You can learn something here still," he said.

The Fawn Mountain Elementary students weren't the only former White Cliff students at the building Monday. Finance Director Mike Houts said his office used to be where he went to first grade in the 1950s.

Gwen McDonald, who started teaching at White Cliff in 1984 and now works at Fawn Mountain Elementary, said she enjoyed touring the renovated building.

McDonald said she would like to see the building become a "wonderful resource for the borough, as it was for the children when I taught here."

Sixth-grader Jasmin Tinney said the building "totally changed and I really like it."

She said the stairs were the only thing that looked the same.

While Dawson Construction could not restore the original stairs because of code requirements, the company made an effort to maintain "the historical feel" of the staircases, according to a letter Bayless sent the borough.

Sixth-grader Sonja Christensen said she had many memories of going to school there, especially fun memories playing on the playground. She said she was "disappointed" that the playground was no longer there. The playground has been turned into a parking lot.

Sixth-grader Noah Silva said he liked the Assembly chambers, saying they looked like a courtroom.

"It doesn't look the same; it looks brighter," sixth-grader Hitsati Hudson said of the building.

The borough had reprints made from the 1930s to 1950s of historical White Cliff photos hanging up in the front lobby and there was a cake with a picture of the White Cliff building for the open house.

Some of the former teachers were wearing the last official red White Cliff Elementary School T-shirt. Historic Ketchikan President Terry Wanzer presented the borough one of those T-shirts framed to hang on the walls.

Sixth-grader Chayce Hasty said he liked seeing where the old classrooms were and "how much they've changed.

"It's a lot different," he said.

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