

WPA works display Michigan city's heritage

\$20 million murals at school belong to U.S. government

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CLARE, Mich. — Clare Schools Superintendent Tom Moline has a dilemma: a \$20 million dilemma, to be exact.

That's the value placed recently on four murals that have graced a wall in the middle school auditorium since 1938, when the building was 16 years old.

Today, the murals, painted by Grand Rapids artist Gerald Mast as part of the Works Progress Administration following the Great Depression, are of such immense historical and monetary value that school officials have to keep them in mind for the future.

But the artwork belongs to the U.S. government — after a fruitless attempt by the school board to purchase the works from the General Accounting Office in 1999 — and Mr. Moline wants the community

to help decide how best to preserve the works while at the same time working toward building a new and more modern auditorium as well as providing larger classrooms for grades five through eight.

Mr. Mast, who worked for the federal government under President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program, painted the murals in Detroit on canvas and brought them to Clare, wrapped on stovepipe, in 1938, Mr. Moline said.

The murals, which depict the oil and gas industry, student activities, and agriculture and academic education, were attached to the auditorium wall with glue made from rabbit eyes that make it next to impossible to remove the canvasses without damaging or destroying them, Mr. Moline said. "We've got a problem," he said. "We've got art that's invaluable." Along with pre-



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Four murals hanging in the Clare Middle School provide the backdrop for Clare school Superintendent Tom Moline, who wants a new building to show them off.

servicing the murals, the district needs a better auditorium than the existing one, Mr. Moline said.

A June, 2000, bond election that included a proposed auditorium to be added to the high school failed by only 13 votes, Mr. Moline said.

Another, a year later, that did not include a new auditorium, passed, Mr. Moline said.

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