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Simple way to better buildings

Since 1978, a federal tax credit has helped preserve tens of thousands of historic and architecturally significant buildings nationwide. But the incentives don't do enough to help one type of structure near and dear to many communities - schools.

Tax credits are available to developers who convert old school buildings to new uses, but the financial assistance isn't open to city or county governments that want to renovate aging schools for continued use as classrooms.

Sens. Mark Warner and Jim Webb recently re-introduced a bill that would extend the tax breaks to private investors who team up with localities to modernize schools that are 50 years or older. A similar effort died without a vote last year, despite bipartisan support.

Among the backers is Majority Leader Eric Cantor, a Richmond Republican who's sponsoring the House version. Other proponents include former Govs. George Allen and Tim Kaine, who are vying for a seat in the U.S. Senate, as well as the current occupant of the governor's mansion, Bob McDonnell.

The idea was raised a couple of years ago by Paul Goldman, a former chairman of the Virginia Democratic Party who saw the potential to save cities and counties money - and save old schools - if the tax credits were broadened.

While mayor of Richmond, Kaine was able to capture tax credits for the city's conversion of Maggie L. Walker High School into a governor's school. The project qualified for the tax breaks because the regional school was considered a new use under tax law.

But the city's later efforts to renovate schools for continued use as local schools hit a wall because of IRS rules.

The legislation before Congress would help localities in Hampton Roads and elsewhere bring older, rundown schools up to standard at a time when construction dollars are scarce.

As Warner and others point out, the benefits extend well beyond that. The renovation projects would create jobs and pump money into the economy.

And there's a multiplying effect: Old schools are deeply embedded in their neighborhoods' identities. Restoring them often leads to the renovation of nearby homes and businesses.

Even a Congress as dysfunctional as this one should be able to see the value in preserving community treasures. "They say we've run out of common ground in this nation," McDonnell recently said. "This bill demonstrates just how mistaken that belief is."

Our region's congressional delegation certainly should seize that common ground. And local school boards and city councils should make sure Congress knows how important the tax credit would be to our communities.

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