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## Shelly the tortoise is being evicted as Springfield decides to close Ecology Center at Scenic Hills

District cites various hazards, but parents and former students and teachers against the move have signed a petition that now numbers more than 2,000 signatures



Shelly, the African spurred tortoise that has lived in the Ecology Center at Scenic Hills Elementary School in the Springfield School District, is losing his home for a quarter century. He is apparently going home with the caretaker teacher who has been looking after him all these years. But there is major resistance to the district's move. (COURTESY PHOTO)

By [PETE BANNAN](mailto:Pbannan@Mainlinemedianews.com) | [Pbannan@Mainlinemedianews.com](mailto:Pbannan@Mainlinemedianews.com) | The Delaware County Daily Times

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It seems Shelly's time in Springfield is running out. He's being evicted.

For the past 24 years, Shelly, an African spurred tortoise, has lived in the Ecology Center, an outdoor learning environment at Scenic Hills Elementary School in Springfield.

Shelly, along with a number of ducks, box turtles, frogs and fish have helped teach children the importance of nature as well as being a calming location at the active school that teaches over 600 children from second to fifth grade.

The [Ecology Center](#), which was begun in 1997, sits on a quarter acre created in an outdoor courtyard at the school, 235 Hillview Drive, that is not accessible to the public. It includes a pond that was relined last year with home and school association money.

It has a rail fence and includes a grassy area.

The building of the pond and stream, and much of the extensive planting, took place during the summer of 1998, according to the district website.

Shelly's former owner purchased him when he was the size of a quarter. It wasn't clear exactly how old Shelly is.

Having outgrown numerous tanks, the owner could not keep up with his growing size, and was looking to rehome him, the website states.

They use the owner's life experience to discuss responsible pet ownership.

The decision to get rid of Shelly and the school's outdoor science habitat comes after [Donna Storti, who has been a teacher for 43 years](#) and who founded and maintained the center for years, announced her retirement.

Peter Brigg, the director of Teaching and Learning for Elementary Education, sent out a letter on Friday stating the district appreciated everything Storti has done, but they feel with her retiring the district could not ensure the maintenance of the facility into the future and that they were closing it down.

During the summer or when the school was closed, Storti or another person she had arranged with would check on the animals.

During the warm months, Shelly lives outside, however he comes inside in the winter.

First year Principal Megan Scelfo had offered to take care of Shelly, but in his letter to the school community, Brigg said her principal duties make that impossible.



The Ecology Center at Scenic Hill Elementary School. (COURTESY PHOTO)

### **2,100 signatures against**

The decision to close the Ecology Center and evict Shelly has not gone down well with Springfield parents and students.

Beth Ely, a parent of a fifth grader and a soon-to-be second grader was furious. She started a [change.org petition](#) Friday, which has gotten over 2,100 signatures to save the ecology center.

“The kids are devastated,” said Ely. “The community is outraged. We built this little ecosystem and now they are destroying it.”

Ely said she was particularly incensed that when her daughter took a tour of the school ahead of going there in second grade. They showed the students the center and visited with Shelly, but none of it will be there in the fall.

“It is so unique,” Ely said. “She was so disappointed that it won’t be there.”

Supporters of the petition agree.

“The ecology center is really important for the school and teaches kids about nature and such. The kids love the ducks and they get to watch them grow up. They love Shelly the tortoise. It’s an amazing tool. Please don’t get rid of it!” said Juliette, who signed the petition.

Mark, an alumni of the school, said the most interesting part of his school experience was the [Ecology Center](#) and it gave him a love for animals and an obsession for learning about them.

“My grandson attends Scenic Hills School and is very upset by this decision as is his sister who currently attends ETR,” said Nancy, who also signed. “As a retired elementary, middle school and high school teacher, I also am upset. I remember years ago when my husband and I lived on E. Scenic Road in Springfield how exciting it was when the Ecology Center opened.”

This is apparently not the first time the district has tried to get rid of the Ecology Center.

Madeleine Powers O’Dowd, who was principal at the school for nine years, said on social media that the district asked her in 2014 to get rid of Shelly and the Ecology Center.

She fought it with the support from the Home and School Association, which helped support the center financially.

Supporters say there is plenty of financial support for the center and are asking why the district is not exploring other options. They are lobbying the district and on Friday at 4 p.m. they will hold a protest out front of the school.

### **Another letter**

On Wednesday the [Springfield School District released](#) a letter stating the decision was made after input from various experts from a safety and sustainability point of view and they also believe the facility presents a significant risk.

Officials said risks include fecal matter and urine near children, the pond is not fenced and poses a drowning hazard, standing water, trip-and-fall hazards, pinch points, splinters, rust issues, unsecured storage of food and chemicals, which could lead to rodents, and a compost pile that does not adhere to standard guidelines.

The district said it will replace the Ecology Center with landscaping with native plants and are committed to balancing the need for a safe and sustainable school environment with the desire to maintain green space.

They will relocate the mallards using procedures like swimming pool relocations, and with appropriate input from experts find new habitats for the box turtles.

As for where Shelly would go, his retiring caretaker, Storti has agreed, apparently with some hesitancy, to take him.

Well-cared-for tortoises are known to live 50, and some as long as 150, years.