



Planning for the Future of PT Schools

Educators are planners. They plan for a unit of study, for a semester of projects, and year-long progress for students at every age. School administrators and Board members are cut from that same cloth, but often their planning involves finances and facilities.

The focus of the District at every level is on the success of our students – providing the best educational opportunities for our children. Doing this effectively also includes ensuring that all school facilities support the educational programming for diverse learners across all grade levels.

Two years ago, the Board undertook the development of a long range Capital Projects plan. These facilities improvements included items large and small – roofing, heating/air conditioning updates, paving needs, furniture replacements, etc. Every item on the lengthy list was considered in light of its educational impact, safety implications, and long-term return on investment.

Through this process, issues with the current High School facility surfaced. Specifically, the Board was interested in addressing the issue of whether or not the current High School was meeting the academic programming needs of our students. Given that the Capital Projects plan also identified several significant capital improvements for the High School, the Board contracted with Hayes Design Group to conduct a thorough Feasibility Study of our High School – a look at not only our building systems and structure, but also at the educational programming needs of our students now and in the future.

“The staff from Hayes Design worked closely with our teachers and students here at the High School,” said Principal Lori Pavlik. “Their team looked at every space and took the time to hear what our issues and needs were.”

Part of that process also involved engaging with parent and community stakeholders who use the current High School facility. Meetings were held with PTA parents, local business owners, coaches, and booster groups to gather input on how the building was, or was not, meeting their needs.

Throughout the process, Hayes Design met with the School Board and Administration regarding their findings. Public updates on the project were provided through the Board’s Buildings and Grounds Committee Meetings.

The most significant findings of the feasibility study were that the building was sound, but in need of updates to the core building systems and that the current building configuration was not fully conducive to our high school educational programming needs. To address the core building systems and create the desired programming, a significant renovation would be required. Costs projections for the comprehensive renovation were approximately \$77 million.

Given that the Board and Township had recently acquired the former Rolling Hills Country Club property, the opportunity to consider constructing a new High School facility at that location. In consideration of the cost estimate for the renovation, Hayes Design was tasked with estimating the cost of building a new facility using the same programming plans that were modeled in the renovation. Being ever mindful of the community impact of their financial decisions, the Board wanted an “apples to apples” comparison as to the cost of a renovation versus the cost of a new building.

Not only did the Board have to consider the financial impact of a High School project, the Board had to ensure that the District had adequate resources to address the capital and educational

needs of all of its operations. To this end, the Board engaged Hayes Design to conduct a District-wide Facilities Assessment. The assessment aimed at identifying the projects and costs needed to keep all District facilities in operation over the next ten years.

Township Growth

New homes and developments are common sites in the Township. To better understand the long-term enrollment implications of development within the Township, the Board sought the assistance of Dr. Shelby Stewman, a demographer and retired professor from Carnegie Mellon University. Dr. Stewman presented his findings to the School Board in March, 2017, projecting that the District’s enrollment would continue to slowly decline over the next ten years.

The current enrollment of slightly over 4,100 students would gradually decline to an enrollment of just over 3,700 in 2026.

“This seem so counter-intuitive to those of us driving through the Township every day,” added Superintendent French. Dr. Stewman pointed out that much of the recent growth and planned developments were targeted for active retirees and families with grown children.

Financing for the Future

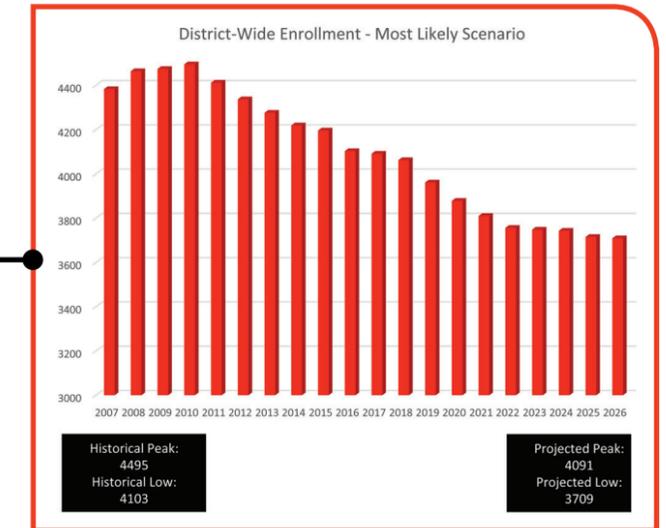
The School Board has a history of solid, long-term financial planning as evidenced by the District’s relatively low per pupil spending and tax burden. Their conservative approach to debt has positioned the District well to be able to take on a large high school project, while still addressing the long term need’s of the other District facilities.

“Our Board has always been very thoughtful about long-term financial planning,” said French. “They wanted to be sure that if we took on any project at the High School, we would have adequate funds to keep up with projects at our other buildings in the District.”

With interest rates on the rise, the Finance Committee of the Board recommended that the District take steps to take advantage of rates before they increased again – knowing that just a small increase in rates could cost millions for a project of this size. At their April meeting, the Board authorized a potential bond issuance of up to \$80 million.

“The April vote did not authorize the immediate borrowing of money,” said Board Finance Chairperson Dr. Jamison Hardy. “It just gave us the ability to time the market when the Board makes a final decision on the project. We will be able to move quickly once we know the direction we are heading. It made the most fiscal sense.”

Another important motion taken at the meeting was the decision to file paperwork known as PlanCon Parts A & B with the Department of Education. When a school district undertakes a major school construction project, they may seek partial reimbursement from the Commonwealth. Authorizing this filing, may make it possible for the District to receive



\$6-8 million in reimbursements for a new High School project. “Following that vote, the Board still has a lot of work to do before making a decision,” clarifies French. “But by planning ahead, we hope to save money in the long run.”

Making the Decision

From the beginning, the Board has viewed the High School project with three potential outcomes: They could do nothing and leave the High School as it is; they could renovate the existing facility; or they could build a new school at the Rolling Hills site.

While initial estimates for a new building were more than \$105 million, the Board has directed the architects to take a more conservative approach in hopes of reducing the price tag. They would like to see a design that reflects the projected smaller enrollment, while allowing for the addition of classrooms down the road if necessary. The goal of the Board is to limit the impact to taxpayers to approximately 1.5 mils to finance the entire project. This would keep the District millage as one of the lowest in both Washington and Allegheny Counties.

Hayes Design is currently working on new building designs to meet the academic programming and financial expectations set forth by the Board. Designs will be presented to the Board in June with the hopes of coming to final decision this summer.

Staying Informed

The Board is dedicated to keeping staff and the community informed. All meetings of the Board are open to the public and are also available to watch online via the District website.

The District has also created a webpage dedicated to the High School project that shares timelines, decisions and documents for the public to review. Links have also been provided for community members where they can ask questions or share their insight with the District.

If you want to learn more, please visit our Facilities Planning page of the District website at www.ptsd.k12.pa.us



The School Board and Administration review building options and financial plans during a Saturday work session in March.