

SCHOOL NEWS >> DISTRICT 99

D.99 invites discussion of facilities planning

Process of gauging community feedback began in 2011

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Community High School District 99 officials sought input April 19 and April 20 from attendees gathering for a set of public meeting about facility needs.

"We're at a point right now where our schools are big enough to contain our student body, which looks like it will be right around 5,000 students for the next 15 or so years," said superintendent Dr. Hank Thiele. "What we don't have are current modern facilities that reflect the learning and the activities that people are doing in the world of work. [It] can't occur here very easily in the spaces as they are built now. They're built for a more outdated mode of learning."

The process of gauging community feedback began in 2011, at which time the Board of Education started the strategic planning process. Since that time, school officials have surveyed the set up

of educational institutions in surrounding communities.

Proposed plans for the two buildings include the introduction of learning commons, reconfiguration of library space and outdoor renovations. Specific changes at Downers Grove North could also include modifications to the gymnasium, while the auditorium serves as a point of focus at Downers Grove South.

Downers Grove South principal Ed Schwartz said the district does the best it can to serve the needs of its students every day, but the reality is education changes.

"I ask you for a just a few seconds think about the classrooms you sat in," he said of D99 parents. "I know what mine looked like. Most were in rows. I was the only one accountable for my learning. I was only one that prepared. Usually, I demonstrated my learning by filling out some piece of paper with a pencil."

That's not the way it is anymore. "You see it with your kids at home [in] the way if you have kids

they need to meet up at places, and they work together," Schwartz said. "They'll go to Starbucks or Panera [Bread] or wherever they can find to work together. That's just how society and life has changed."

The District wants to provide students with better spaces to learn and collaborate in.

Addison Trail and Oswego East high schools, for example, have constructed learning commons into their schools.

Roughly \$2 million a year is currently spent to meet maintenance facility needs. The District typically uses its operating fund to take care of building projects.

"Funding for this project, we already spent quite a bit money out of the operating funds for maintenance of our buildings," said Mark Staehlin, controller for District 99.

Staehlin noted that District 99 staff and officials strive to work within their means and said they're cognizant of impact of improvement projects on taxpayers.

Between 1997 and 2001, the community issued a bond issuance to do upgrades across the school district.

"These will fall off in 2019," Staehlin said.

The district's proposed plans for renovations could be met by two spending solutions, one in which relies on maintaining the current level of funding and another that requires taxpayers to pay an added amount of less than \$100 each year. At a minimum, the project could cost close to \$95 million, minus modifications to the gymnasium at Downers Grove North and the auditorium at Downers Grove South, while the all-inclusive plan amounts to an estimated \$126 million.

To date, no renovation proposals have been approved.

A number of people were in attendance to express their views and ask questions during the public meetings.

"I like the idea of the instructional commons," said Sue Gage, a Downers Grove South parent. "I've seen it in other schools."

Gage said she thinks the renovations plans will be worthwhile projects to explore.

"It'll build more of a community, a sense of community within the school," she said. "It does seem like it's very sectioned off a lot in the school, just the way the design and layout [is.]"

The District is looking to form a citizens' task force to gain further input with the goal of working toward a solution to address the District's facilities maintenance needs.

In 2018, school officials will look to consider what options to take with regard to funding upgrades.