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Construction Project Is A Long, Winding Road

By Michael Stein

In the weeks leading up to a Barnesville School District bond referendum vote on August 9, 2016, opinions flew left and right, through yards signs, letters to the editor, and school board meetings.

Was the \$35.19 million proposal to improve and expand Barnesville schools the right move to insure the future growth of the district?

One side said, “No. This project is not cost effective.” The no-voters said they were not against improvements, but the dollars were too much given the size of the district. They said much of the tax burden would be placed on farmers in the district.

The other side said the proposed project was needed to support quality education and future growth. They talked about increasing enrollment causing crowding in classrooms, major repairs that have been postponed, historic low interest rates and construction costs, and a crucial need to provide better access to students with disabilities.

On August 9, 2016, district voters went to the polls with the no side winning by a decisive 71 percent; therefore, it was back to square one for district administrators and board members.

At subsequent board meetings and work sessions, some things became crystal clear: doing nothing further was not an option as building issues needed to be addressed; modifying a proposal that would be palatable to a majority of district voters was going to take a lot of time and effort.

As the post-vote discussions began, there seemed to be many more questions than answers. Should



Transformation of the middle block between the schools from late summer 2019 to March 2021. The new high school commons on the far left sits on what once was a residential stretch of Fourth Street from Fifth Ave. SE to Third Ave. SE.

the district pursue building on the middle block? Can a renovation project be done for less than \$20 million? Priority lists were revised, but basic needs were still there.

District consultants RA Morton and Wendel Architects were challenged with presenting a variety of plans with a broad range of price tags.

By early 2018, school board members agreed that construction on the middle block would be part of the plan. But there was still a gulf between what bond referendum amounts voters would approve. One board member felt voters would not approve a plan that’s much over \$15 million. Others were more optimistic, feeling that something in the area of \$23 million, which included about \$4 million in contingency costs, could be doable.

“That amount is significant, but it takes care of our needs for many years,” said board chair Dion Bredman. “If we go too low we’re just putting a Band-Aid on it.”

Other features, including a walking track in the new proposed gym and an enclosed walkway between the proposed auditorium and elementary classroom addition,

received considerable amount of attention and debate. Proponents said the track would receive daily use by students and could be opened to the public at designated times. The enclosed walkway would provide a safe access and protection from the elements for elementary students using the gym and auditorium. To put either of those additional features on hold and do them at some future time would be extremely cost prohibitive.

The meetings and work sessions continued well into 2018. Several plans and cost estimates were reviewed until the board narrowly—by a 4-3 margin—approved presenting a \$26 million bond referendum to the voters at the November general election.

The vote was much closer than in 2016, but still failed.

At the board’s first post-election work session on November 28, 2018, chair Dion Bredman opened the session by asking rhetorically “Are we close to getting this done, or are we way off base?”

An underlying sense of optimism prevailed into the new year. After several months of more special meetings and work sessions, board members whittled down a building and renovation proposal

On May 8, the board agreed by a 7-0 vote on a three-question ballot. The primary question would ask voters to approve \$24.5 million for an addition between the two schools, new elementary classrooms and renovation of areas for science and special education.

The second question would ask voters to approve an additional \$1.55 million to include an elevated walking track in the new gymnasium and a balcony in the auditorium for the purpose of additional seating capacity.

The third question would ask voters to approve a connecting link over the street from Atkinson Elementary to the middle block addition. The estimated cost for the link is \$1.35 million.

In total, the district was asking for more than it did in 2018. But the conditions seemed a bit more conducive to getting a referendum approved. Low interest rates and an increase in the ag tax credit worked in the district’s favor.

As it turned out at the August

2019 special election, the third time was a charm. Voters said yes to all three questions.

“I think everyone will see how much better served our students and teachers will be,” Ellerbusch said. “I’ve been through it in the other districts I’ve worked for. This is going to take Barnesville students forward for many years. And it will help move the community forward as well.”

At long last, construction begins in early 2020

Starting with clearing out all the remaining structures in the middle block in time for spring 2020 construction, the entire school campus underwent a dramatic metamorphosis. By the summer, residents were watching flatbed semis hauling individual wall panels for the gym, auditorium and new commons area from the Taracon plant near Hawley. Huge cranes set the walls into place one by one, and in a matter of weeks the gym and auditorium were taking shape.

At the same time, concrete blocks were being made on site at Atkinson Elementary for the classroom addition.

There were certainly bumps in the road along the way. The pandemic created delays in a number of ways. Suppliers had to cut back when their workers were hit by the virus; on-site crews were also testing positive or had to quarantine because of exposures to the virus.

Despite all that, significant visible

progress on the elementary addition, gym, auditorium and high school commons continued throughout the fall and winter.

Favorable economic conditions allowed the district to expand the scope of the project. Of primary benefit was the fact that initial bid packages were coming in under budget and contingency funds stayed fairly strong.

With the construction budget in good shape, the district was able to move forward with constructing a new \$1.297 million ag and metal shop on the northwest corner of the high school and renovating the current shop, relocating the high school principal’s office to the front entrance area, and relocating the kitchen to the weight and wrestling room area, which will be relocated to the new gym.

The current school year calendar was altered to allow for an early start on summer construction. Right after students start summer break on May 14, the classroom and office addition at Atkinson is expected to be ready. Once students and staff are out of the building, crews will begin moving furniture from the existing offices and classrooms into the new addition.

As of mid-March 2021, roofing on the new high school commons area and gymnasium was completed. The process of pouring the concrete floor in those two structures had begun with a ground thawing process that involved hot water piping.

Because the auditorium structure is a little more complex, the roof was not expected to be in until mid to late April.

As the wrestling season came to an end, demolition was set to begin

Summer of 2021 will be buzzing with construction activity **CONTINUED ON PAGE 6A**



A crane begins the process of moving material from a stack and over the wall for use on a stair riser in the new auditorium.



The end of this corridor in the new elementary classroom addition leads to the overhead walkway, which will be installed this summer.



Along with classrooms, the new addition at Atkinson Elementary will include the main office and the Community Education office.



This early stage of construction in the new auditorium is where the band and choir rooms will be located.



And here’s how it looks as of March 2021. After the school year ends, crews will begin moving furniture and equipment into the new classrooms and offices.