

A High School for This Century

“The current Lee High facility has served Staunton students for almost 50 years and is no longer sufficient to handle all that is being asked of a 21st century high school. We want to look to a bright future, in a facility that will move us forward by supporting core instructional programs as well as expanded course offerings to ensure graduates are well-prepared for college and career goals.”

Ron Ramsey, Chair - Staunton City School Board

Last Monday, Staunton’s school board voted unanimously to recommend to City Council building a high school on a new site, including all necessary athletic fields. Given that Staunton has likely never funded a project this large nor built a high school since the late 1920s, board members want to review how we arrived at this decision.

As momentous as this may sound, it is only a recommendation ... the first definitive step in a lengthy process. For two or three years, the school board, the community and city council will face many more decisions, starting with whether Council supports funding our plan; later choices will deal with costs, sites, and design. We encourage all community members to engage fully in this process.

First, a little history.

About five years ago, City Council included in its long-range capital investment plan a \$75 million “placeholder” for the future of our high school, knowing that the declining condition and poor layout had made it clear to both the school system and the city that the current Lee High – originally built in 1966 as a junior high school and renovated in 1982-84 – eventually would need serious attention.

The work on the question began in earnest in 2013 when the board authorized the search for an architectural firm to conduct a detailed study. That September we selected Crabtree, Rohrbaugh & Associates to provide us with a comprehensive overview and evaluation of the facility, to include multiple options for improvement. We approached the possibilities with a wide-open perspective.

By May 2014, CR&A had conducted countless visits to appraise the current site, met with and surveyed school and system staff, community members, students and the school board, and held multiple public forums to share information and get community input.

Their completed report included six facility design concepts ... five of them on the present site ranging from “baseline” improvements costing around \$30 million, up to the construction of a new school on the existing site (keeping the auditorium and displacing the existing track and tennis courts with new buildings) for around \$50 million; a sixth concept, presented as a concept for a new school on a yet-to-be-determined site, was estimated to cost over \$60 million, including the purchase of land and site amendments.

In a discussion before voting last Monday, board members raised the many advantages of building on a new site compared to tearing down and rebuilding, relying on the study and also raising other points:

- Quality of education is the foremost consideration; it’s not just the building’s age that is a concern, though that certainly is significant. Emerging changes in curriculum and expanding courses of study have particularly affected high schools, and more self-directed and

individualized learning have created the need for more specialized rooms and flexible spaces of variable sizes. Collaborative, hands-on learning in all areas also is driving major design changes.

- In many ways, the current building was a compromise in its conversion from a junior high school. The size and contour of the site limits the possibilities for the present and future needs of a first-class high school. We shouldn't box ourselves in again; starting with a blank slate avoids disruption of learning, and saves time and money wasted on demolition and temporary classrooms.
- A true campus-style school with consolidated athletic facilities would save on both personnel and transportation resources.
- CR&A, applying two commonly-used indicators of a building's health, judged that Lee HS's scores put it in the range as a "candidate for replacement."*
- The current building could be considered by city government and/or regional programs for a range of potential uses.
- Some have said money for a new site/building should be applied to instruction and more attractive salaries; keep in mind capital improvement funds come from an entirely different funding "stream" (we also continue to work on improving our salary scales and classroom supplies, as demonstrated in our recent budgets).
- Staunton is seeking to attract businesses and families to expand our local economy – schools are a primary factor for both ... and the high school is the flagship.

Please contact Board members and Supt. Linda Reviea through our website (www.staunton.k12.va.us) and click on "About Us" or "Central Office") with your comments and questions.

*Facility Condition Index = 65.85%; Facility Cost Index = 66.27%-69.58% range