

ROCHESTER HIGH SCHOOL REPURPOSING PROJECT

BACKGROUND

The Rochester High School (RHS) graduated its last class in 2018. The Rochester Stockbridge Unified District (RSUD) closed the RHS building during the pandemic and subsequently determined it is no longer needed for educational purposes, closing the building permanently. The agreement merging the Rochester and Stockbridge school boards into a unified district, per Act 46, stipulates the sale price of the RHS building to the Town of Rochester at \$1.00, if the Town should seek to purchase it. As of 1/15/22 the RSUD Board has made no capital improvements to the RHS building.

The agreement states that such a sale is conditioned by the following:

“ . . . shall be conditioned upon the Town/City owning and utilizing the real property for community and public purposes for a minimum of five years. In the event a Town/City elects to sell the real property prior to five years of ownership, the Town/City shall compensate the Unified District for all capital improvements and renovations completed after the formation of the Unified District and before the sale to the Town/City.”

RHS REPURPOSING

In February 2020 a volunteer RHS Repurposing Committee formed and by late spring began to meet regularly to explore repurposing options for the building into a multi-use facility, designed to meet community identified local and regional needs. The work has been done with consent from the Rochester Select Board and RSUD Board. The goal of this community led effort is for a repurposed RHS building to be a financially viable and sustaining operation, continuing its legacy as a vibrant center for learning, the arts, and social engagement, serving this region and beyond.

On behalf of the Town of Rochester, in April 2021 members of the committee wrote and submitted a planning grant to the VT Department of Housing and Community Development, to fund a feasibility study of a repurposed RHS building. This grant was awarded in the amount of \$50,000, with which the Town retained the services of Fairweather Consultants of New Paltz, NY, and GBA Architects of Montpelier, VT. The study will include projected profit and loss, a master space plan, master facility capital improvement plan, and a high level assessment of possible funding sources, with a projected completion in summer of 2022. Also evaluated will be the pros and cons of Town ownership of the building vs. ownership by a local nonprofit corporation. The results of the feasibility study will be presented at a Special Town Meeting this summer to vote on Town acquisition of the building.

At the present time, the repurposing proposal includes the following components: Adult Daycare Center, Childcare Center, Arts and Learning Center, Makerspace, and rental office spaces. Additional programs are being explored as the planning process continues.

ARTS and LEARNING CENTER; HUB Arts and Learning Alliance (HALA)—Coordinators: Sue Ribaldo, Dorothy Robson, Midge Scanlan, and Lesley Straus

HALA is a cultural coalition that builds on the strengths and resources of long-established local organizations that sponsor arts, learning, and outdoor events in the Quintown region. HALA includes, but is not limited to, the following: Bald Mountain Theater, BigTown Gallery/BigTown Projects, Green Mountain Suzuki Institute, Hancock Town Pride Committee, Rochester Chamber Music Society, Rochester Recreation Committee, and White River Valley Players. Also included are: Pierce Hall Community Center, Green Mountain Bikes, Ridgeline Outdoor Collective, and the town public libraries of Hancock Rochester, and Pittsfield.

MAKERSPACE—Coordinators: Robert Meagher and Dick Robson

Membership accessed shop space that provides tools, training, classes, and networking opportunities on a fee basis. The former RHS shop contains some equipment, and more would be acquired to provide the following: woodworking and metalworking equipment, an electronics lab, 3D printers, stained-glass

equipment, computer-guided routers and engravers, and laser cutters. A community survey indicated interest in training in the trades of plumbing, electrical, and basic auto mechanics.

BUSINESS INCUBATOR/CO-WORKING OFFICES—Coordinators: Vic Ribauda and Kathryn Schenkman
Affordable office rentals for small businesses and first-time entrepreneurs that allow tenants to conduct and grow their company while retaining a larger portion of initial income. Benefits could include shared office services, and access to the Makerspace and auditorium.

NEXT GENERATION CHILDCARE CENTER—Coordinators: Lauren Skaskiw, Burleigh Griffith, Kayden Hamlin, and Mickaela Richardson
Childcare shortage is cited in local, regional, and statewide plans. A community survey with 30+ respondents demonstrated an immediate need to support a local childcare center. A core group of preschool professionals that includes teachers in the adjacent elementary school, one of whom is an operator of an existing licensed facility, organized itself as a nonprofit to operate a registered child daycare center in the RHS building. The center will provide toddler daycare and a Pre-School After School Program.

ADULT DAYCARE CENTER: Coordinators: Lolly Lindsey and Kathryn Schenkman
Adult day care is an identified regional need, intensified during the pandemic and amplified by demographic information. Adult Daycare Centers support the health, nutritional, and social needs of vulnerable adults in a group setting, by professionally certified staff. The benefits of locating an ADC under the same roof as an Arts and Learning Center is a unique feature to this project. Music, performance, and movement are effectively utilized in therapies for people with mental health problems, cognitive impairment, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities. We are exploring potential partnerships with existing licensed providers, and the possibility of offering onsite LNA certification training.

PRELIMINARY FINANCIAL ASSESSMENT OF BUILDING UPGRADES

While the decommissioned RHS building holds great potential it also carries significant financial obligation. The Black River Design Facilities and Functional Analysis report completed in Oct 2019, commissioned by the RSUD Board, identified needed capital improvements for all school properties within the RSUD, including projected costs for RHS upgrades of several million dollars, depending on the intended use. That report is available on the Town of Rochester website.

The consulting architect has reviewed the Black River report, toured the building, and advised that the high school building will need capital improvements of at least \$2 million to address issues such as boiler replacement and other heating system components, replacement of the electrical panel, ventilation system improvements, among others. The completed feasibility study report will include a list of recommended capital improvements to suit the repurposed building, with updated cost estimates. We anticipate that some of the upgrades could be implemented overtime, as available funding and program needs evolve. Government funding, grants, and philanthropy would be pursued to fund building improvements. Although school district records indicate past heating costs of \$50,000 and more for some years, upgrades to the heating system and improvements in building insulation could reduce that cost going forward.

Members of this committee envision a repurposed building as a regional asset for the future, providing opportunities for essential services, economic development, the arts, learning, and social engagement. Alternatively, its demolition was estimated at \$770,000 in 2019, and now could be closer to \$1 million. To do nothing and let it deteriorate into a major eyesore in our village center is ill advised. Instead, our overall goal is that this legacy building will continue to serve this valley as a productive and highly desirable asset.

Anyone with questions or comments about this project may contact either of the committee co-chairs: Kathryn Schenkman kms@penstrokepress.com or Vic Ribauda vic.ribauda@gmail.com.