

What To Do with the Old School?

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Katheryn Schenkman speaks at a Rochester meeting focused on repurposing the former Rochester High School building while Dick Robson waits his turn. (Herald / Jerry LeBlond)

The Rochester Selectboard hosted a public meeting Wednesday evening, July 13, 2022 at the former Rochester High School (RHS) auditorium and via Zoom to receive, discuss, and hear public comment on the consultant's report of the High School Repurposing Feasibility Study.

Selectboard Chair Doon Hinderyckx pointedly noted that the selectboard will not make the decision of whether or not to take over ownership of the building from the Rochester Stockbridge Unified District (RSUD).

Board member Pat Harvey explained that, "We need to have all of the facts before asking the voters to decide to purchase the building or not."

Acquiring the building before the completion of certain steps would make the project ineligible for important grant funding sources, including the planning grant that paid for the feasibility study.

The last class to graduate from the high school was in 2018. In February 2020, Envision Rochester hosted a community engagement event that prioritized community needs, and launched the RHS Repurposing Committee, which has worked with approval and on behalf of the RSUD and Rochester Selectboard to explore options for repurposing the RHS building.

In September 2020, the RSUD permanently closed the RHS for educational purposes. Earlier that summer, a series of focus groups met to gather information and input to draft a proposal that responded to identified community needs. In April 2021, the committee submitted a Vermont Community Development Grant proposal to fund a feasibility study. That proposal was eventually awarded \$50,000.

The town retained the services of Fairweather Consulting of New Paltz, N.Y., and Gregg Gossens GBA Architecture of Montpelier, to review the committee's proposed uses for the building, estimate the capital and operating costs, and to advise on the means and funding sources to pay for building upgrades and its sustainability. The study was launched November 17, 2021.

In April 2022, the committee submitted a request to Senator Bernie Sanders for Congressionally Directed Funds to cover the cost of upgrading the building. Sanders funded the project in the amount of \$1.5 million, which is pending Congressional approval, and requires a match.

Committee co-chair Vic Ribaudo introduced the consultant, Peter Fairweather, who began his feasibility study presentation by explaining that the purpose is to provide potential funders with a rationale for supporting the project. It uses the best available information to determine if reusing the RHS can be financially feasible, asking if it is possible, what it would look like, and what are the critical success factors.

"The work is based on assumptions that are reasonable," he said. "In any areas of uncertainty, it uses assumptions that make it more difficult to succeed (i.e., a conservative approach). It is just the starting point. As work on the project goes forward, the expected results will be refined by experience."

Market research involved data analysis and outreach to stakeholders in Rochester and beyond, looking at population demographics, economic conditions, consumer spending preferences for retail, cultural activities, and recreation; and health-related demographics and spending. It also included community based surveys and outreach to the Quin-Town municipalities.

Fifty people participated in the community engagement event that launched the RHS Repurposing project in February 2020, and 36 community members actively engaged in the planning process for the project, working within multiple committees related to each component identified in the re-use proposal.

There were 48 respondents with interest in maker space membership, with 14 respondents wanting to teach and/ or mentor in the maker space classes; 30 respondents to the Childcare Center survey stated their need of a childcare facility; and regarding an adult day center (ADC) and lifelong learning center, there were 97 respondents, ages ranging from 35–96 years.

“This is the information that will define the options for this building,” Fairweather emphasized.

The market analysis identifies several critical success factors for the economic sustainability of the former Rochester High School building— that arts groups and small nonprofits are not, by themselves, the path to sustainability; and that economic sustainability for the building requires a diverse tenant base. One or two anchor tenants would be required and six prospective tenants have been identified.

Architectural consultant Gregg Gossens shared a diagram of the spaces in the building, noting that, “The overall building is in good shape—the bones are excellent, but there are some major things that need to be done.”

The consultant reported that the estimated cost for building renovation, adjusted for the current rate of inflation, would be \$3.1 million. This work, which could be done in phases over time, includes replacement of the heat and electric systems and upgrading the building envelope for maximum energy efficiency, putting it on a path to net zero. Additionally, the estimated annual operating costs, adjusted for the current rate of inflation, would be \$97,370. Adding the cost of management be \$110,210; and adding the cost of a \$50,000 annual capital reserve fund would be \$160,210.

Many items on the Phase 1 list are eligible for targeted funding from multiple sources. In order to be eligible for many sources of government funds, the former RHS site must undergo an environmental review for environmental hazards and a review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

On behalf of the town and school district, and with guidance from Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC) and the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development, the committee is taking the necessary steps to proceed with the full NEPA requirements.

Fairweather noted that, “Completing this process, regardless of the final outcome, will be a lengthy, complex process requiring close cooperation between the town, school district, and many partners that have already offered assistance. Arranging financing and overseeing the renovation will be a complex process that will require professional project management.”

He said the committee will proceed with a project manager search, start an environmental consultant search, and proceed with the environmental assessment process.

Committee member Dick Robson reported they had been informed recently that the site's location, both the floodplain and flood way, would make it potentially ineligible for some federally sourced grants. To remedy this situation, the committee's next step is to work with the RSUD to adjust the property boundary, eliminating the sliver of land located in the floodway, and apply for a map adjustment.

A survey is needed to make sure that the corps of engineers has the survey correct. The committee is in the process of getting proposals to have that survey done that will be paid with funds remaining in the planning grant.

Q & A

Among the issues raised during a question-and-answer period near the end of the meeting, Mark Blaine asked if Act 250 applies to this project. Committee member and Rochester Planning Commission member Sandy Haas replied that "Rochester is a '10-acre town,' and does not require an Act 250 permit for a parcel smaller than 10 acres."

Dean Mendell said that the recreation committee was very interested in increasing usage of the SkateSpace site next door. He asked if the town was considering the possibility of moving the town offices to the building, as pictured in Gossens Conceptual Space Designation Diagram, and Schenkman replied, "That's just part of the discussion now."

Hinderyckx added that this had not been requested by the selectboard.

Anna Isaacs asked if there were other successful examples of repurposed school buildings in Vermont, and Ribaudo noted that Wilmington had a much older school building that now holds a mix of professional and town uses, "which has been in place of a couple of years now and they're making a go of it."

Fairweather also cited a "work in progress" in Springfield as another example of a community repurposing project.

"The only way a visionary thing like this can happen is if a community works together," Schenkman said in closing. "It's not only an investment for now, it's an investment for our future—an asset for the five towns in our valley community."

Updates to the RHS repurposing project can be found on the website at rochesterrepurposingproject.org.