

Meeting growth and space needs



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Avon Elementary Preschool Teacher Kristy Yurczyk and Albany Area Schools Superintendent Travis Okerlund, on July 14, sit near the playground at North Park in Albany, near the former Albany Hospital building. A proposed plan calls for it to be renovated into an Early Learning Center.

Albany Area Schools staff excited about possible Early Learning Center

BY CAROL MOORMAN
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To meet growth and space issues, the Albany School Board is proposing to purchase and renovate the former Albany Hospital into an Early Learning Center for preschool and kindergarten students. This plan would alleviate space constraints now and into the future at both Albany and Avon Elementary.

A few key components of early childhood education include adequate classroom space, collaborative learning areas, an area dedicated to large motor skills and gym time. While they currently have this at Avon Elementary, a heavily-scheduled program

makes this difficult to use.

"We have 45 minutes, and you divvy up the time," said Kristy Yurczyk, Early Childhood coordinator. "Sometimes, we're overlapping and have to rearrange our schedules."

She said it's the simple things that make teaching effective, like sufficient space, whether for classrooms, activities or storage.

"Having rooms for special education, speech, and fine motor skills so they're not in the hallway is important," Yurczyk said.

Superintendent Travis Okerlund said he's watched special education teachers working with students in hallways trying to maximize the space.

"They're doing a good job over-

coming challenges, but all kids need to spread out and not be confined for a long time," he said.

Enrollment at Albany Area Schools, not including preschoolers, has increased from 1,647 students during the 2011-12 school year to 1,779 students in 2020-21. According to demographic and census information, enrollment is projected to reach approximately 1,850 students by 2025-26.

"We're fortunate, in our district, to be in the position with steady growth, in a district that's thriving," said Cassie Novak, Community Education director.

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from front

District voters, Tuesday, Aug. 9, will be asked to vote on a \$16,960,000 single-question bond referendum that, if approved, would pay for the purchase and renovation of the former hospital building to serve as an Early Learning Center with a multi-purpose room addition. The cost to buy the property is about \$400,000, and there is \$320,000 earmarked for asbestos removal. The total cost of \$16.96 million includes all necessary renovations to the former hospital, the multi-purpose addition and all issuance and financing costs.

The proposed plan includes approximately 16 classrooms, breakout and collaborative learning areas, an office, specialist spaces, other necessary support spaces including physical therapy/occupational therapy and speech, a kitchen and serving area and an addition to serve as a multi-purpose and large motor space for students, staff and the community.

If approved, the current plan is to house all Albany preschool and kindergarten students at the new Early Learning Center, which means Albany students will no longer be bussed to Avon, decreasing traffic congestion at the Albany campus. Avon Elementary will still have a couple dedicated preschool rooms and retain all Avon kindergarteners.

"Students can attend school in their home community," Novak said. "That has come through loud and

clear in past surveys as we looked at space concerns."

It will also free up four to five classrooms at both Albany Elementary and Avon Elementary.

The referendum is the result of more than four years of planning to address steady enrollment growth and lack of space at both elementary schools. The process included school board members, district administration, parents and community members. Novak explained the school board and administration looked at building on to existing elementary schools, but "it's not just the additional classroom space we need, but our common spaces (cafeteria, gymnasium, hallways) are already bursting at the seams, and we aren't able to accommodate more students."

The proposed plan utilizes a vacant building and provides access to amenities, like the North Park playground.

Pat Overom, principal from ICS, the school's consulting firm for the proposed project, said in recent years, seven classrooms have been added at Albany Elementary, putting more pressure on core areas.

"That building is maxed out," he said.

After reviewing several options, the board determined renovating the former hospital building is more cost effective than building new. This building, constructed in the late 1960s, is solid, and the infrastructure is also in place.

"Being able to use a community asset that served the larger community is a win-win, instead of it sitting vacant," Novak said.

Passage of the referendum would impact the school portion of property taxes for close to 10,000 district residents. The owner of a residential home valued at \$150,000 would see an increase of \$5.75 per month or \$69 per year starting in 2023 for the 20-year term of the bond. A commercial or industrial business valued at \$250,000 would see an increase of \$19.25 per month or \$231 a year. The State of Minnesota's Ag-School Tax Credit provides a 70% tax credit to all agricultural property except the house, garage and one acre surrounding the agricultural homestead.

The proposed increase would be added to the amount district residents are currently paying for the 2015 referendum. In 2015, 81% of district residents approved a \$33 million project which expanded the middle/high school and included a seven-classroom addition to Albany Elementary to help prepare for additional growth.

There are two ways district residents can vote. Early voting is available now through Monday, Aug. 8. District residents can vote early via absentee ballot by mail-in or in person at the Stearns County Service Center, 3301 County Road 138 in Waite Park; or at St. Cloud City Hall, 1201 Seventh Street South in St. Cloud. Residents in Collegeville Township, Farming Township, Munson Township, Oak Township and St. Anthony Village

were mailed mail-in ballots with a due date no later than 8 p.m., Tuesday, Aug. 9. On Election Day, Aug. 9, district residents can vote in person from 7 a.m.-8 p.m. at their usual polling location.

Overom said if the referendum passes, design work would start this fall and take several months, followed by bidding and construction with an anticipated completion date of late fall 2024.

Novak said if the referendum does not pass, the school board would have to make difficult decisions.

"Our space needs are not going away. That will always be in the forefront," she said. "We would have to look at other less cost-effective measures and would need to start limiting programs for the families of our youngest learners."

More referendum information can be found online at www.ourhuskiesourfuture.org. An ice cream social will be hosted from 5:30-7:30 p.m., Wednesday, July 20, at North Park when residents can learn about the referendum, have their questions answered and meet Okerlund, who started as superintendent July 1.

With a new school year a little more than one month away, Yurczyk is looking forward to being back in the classroom with her students. She is excited about the future of the school district and the possibility of an Early Learning Center in a building that has cared for people of all ages with a nearby park. Ultimately, residents will decide on the referendum.

"It's a beautiful and inviting space," Yurczyk said. "It makes my heart happy to think about this."