

**Community-Prepared Facility Recommendation:
Rootstown Local School District**

5/22/17

Prepared by

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With significant input from community members:

November 2016 to May 2017

Executive Summary

Throughout a 7-month process, a group of Rootstown community members in partnership with the Rootstown Local School District administration, Rockmill Financial Advisors (Ohio governmental finance specialists) and The GPD Group (Architecture and Design) met to consider facilities and financing options to develop a recommendation for capital improvements to the Rootstown Local Schools.

The Community Members Committee (hereafter referred to as the ‘committee’), having finalized its deliberations and reaching a general consensus on May 15, 2017, *recommends that the Rootstown Board of Education proceed with a November, 2017 ballot issue to raise the funds necessary to support a new K-12 school for the district.* It is the recommendation of this committee that the ballot issue reflect a split funding initiative including a new 0.5% W2-only income tax and an approximately 3-4 millage property tax (i.e., pending final site preference).

As part of this building project, the committee endorses the inclusion of a fully co-funded auditorium model (consistent with the Coventry High School auditorium), complete with retractable ‘stadium’ seating and enclosure curtains. Having seen this auditorium option, and with the input of GPD, the committee firmly believes this option maximizes educational utility and minimizes cost to the district. This is an outstanding option with considerable potential for student and community use.

The committee also recommends a complete, modern upgrade to the School’s athletic facilities. This includes, but need not be limited to stadium improvements including a football/soccer field with artificial surface; a 6-8 lane rubberized track; concession facility with restrooms, storage options, and field house/athletic team rooms; baseball and softball fields; wrestling facility; a new weight room; and attached gymnasiums with retracting dividers and flexible seating.

To improve community involvement, we recommend creating community-accessible meeting spaces of various sizes (small 10 person rooms up to large 50-100 person spaces) that can be used by community members and the school alike. This space could be greatly enhanced and marketed with the addition of a community-accessible kitchen facility. Finally, the school should consider planning for and seeking partnerships with value-add partners like the Portage County Library system to share space and serve the community at large.

Amidst the consensus agreement on the aforementioned issues, this committee recognizes the somewhat more complex issue of selecting a site on which to establish the school facilities of the future. We found an essentially even split between the desire to remain on the current site and a willingness to move to a larger site nearby. While staying on the St. Rt. 44 site would be a

“Our schools represent the heart of the community...now in need of a new vision for education, efficiency, and growth options given the learning and social challenges in the 21st century”

slightly less costly initiative, moving to a new site offers a chance to create more complete and future growth-capable campus. It is the belief of the committee that both options offer strong benefits and marketable points that the community could potentially support. Both locations represent reasonable opportunities to pass the ballot issue. The school administration, in conjunction with the board of education and community involvement, should continue to research information and refine their options until the ballot issue value must be defined.

The Decision-Making Process: October, 2016 through May, 2017

The decision to consider the facilities needs for the students of the Rootstown Local School District was first brought to the attention of the Rootstown community October 6, 2016. A meeting led by Superintendent Andrew Hawkins, in conjunction with representatives from GPD group (Architecture and Design) and Rockmill Financial Advisors (Ohio governmental finance specialists), was attended by nearly 100 community members. The recent state of Ohio facilities evaluation was discussed. Given the condition of current structures (est. 1916, 1955, 1966), the district is eligible for 41% cofunding of construction/renovation costs. Accordingly, the proposal to investigate options regarding school building renovations, new building construction, site evaluations, and financing was presented to those in attendance amid many questions and considerable discussion. Community members were invited to participate in the process of seeking a solution to district needs, and a survey of those in attendance was conducted. The results of this initial survey are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Initial Survey (October 6, 2016)

| Question | Yes | No |
|---|-----|-----|
| Do you believe the school is being responsible and looking into all feasible options to address facility needs? | 93% | 7% |
| After hearing information about the condition of our current facilities from the experts tonight, which option do you believe is best for the community's children? | | |
| 1. Continue to maintain/repair current facilities | 5% | |
| 2. Renovate current facilities | 15% | |
| 3. Build new facilities | 80% | |
| If the school were to build new facilities, which option would you support? | | |
| 1. Build new facilities on the school's current location | 42% | |
| 2. Move the school to a different location | 58% | |
| Do you think the school should use the 41% funding option and follow the state's construction guidelines? | 89% | 11% |
| If the school decides to renovate or build new facilities, the preferred ballot issue should be: | | |
| 1. An income tax for Rootstown residents (no retirees) | 9% | |
| 2. A new property tax for Rootstown residents | 18% | |
| 3. A combination of property tax and income tax | 73% | |

Following the initial community meeting (October 6, 2016) regularly scheduled meetings were posted and held--typically monthly. All interested parties were included in email notifications, and all information discussed at each meeting was made available on a Facility page at the Rootstown Local School District website (<http://www.rootstown.sparcc.org/Content2/162>). Meeting attendees (i.e., generally 30-70 individuals) included independent community members, Rootstown teachers and administration, members from the Rootstown Board of Education, and local business owners.

As an ad-hoc community group, no formal meeting minutes or votes were maintained, although meeting summaries and updates were routinely provided via email notifications (i.e., Kevin Kaut; Superintendent Andrew Hawkins). All questions were considered and addressed if possible, either with readily available information or at later meetings with newly gathered information. To the best of our knowledge, this recommendation fairly and accurately represents the information gathered by the committee.

The State of Present Day School District Facilities

It is the sentiment of many community members that the Rootstown schools provide an excellent education for our children, with outstanding and invested teachers, administrators, and staff. Moreover, it is to the credit of our Board of Education that the district has remained fiscally responsible while seeking to provide the best in educational personnel for the children of this

“Given changing educational demands...districts either adapt successfully or face a future of mediocrity and stagnation, particularly in the face of growing educational alternatives/choices with real (or perceived) facilities advantages”

district. Obviously, our professional educators provide an outstanding service to our students, and deliver a quality educational experience within the context of available resources. It is the clear intent of this committee to convey to the Board of Education that solutions to today’s educational challenges are inherently evident in the analysis of the district’s infrastructure inadequacies.

The Rootstown Local School District is the only district in Portage County that has not undertaken a facilities improvement project in the last 30 years. The buildings in this district, historically serving our students well, are now aging and increasingly inefficient. Educational trends and curricular demands

are rapidly evolving in accord with societal changes, with increasing emphasis on modernization and technologically infused learning environments. Districts either adapt successfully or face a future of mediocrity and stagnation--particularly in the face of growing educational alternatives/choices with real (or perceived) facilities advantages (e.g., Biomed; Parochial schools; regional public school options). ***The Rootstown Local School District is at an important period in its history, and it is the hope of this committee that generations of future students will benefit from decisions made now.***

To be sure, Rootstown Middle School represents a local historical landmark, now exceeding 100 years old. The original school building admittedly holds a great deal of sentiment and nostalgia for many community members. We recognize this as an important issue, and one that impacts the decision-making of certain individuals. However, the



unfortunate reality is that the middle school is structurally failing in several ways. There are significant issues with the roof and drainage--not to mention issues of temperature regulation. The building has encapsulated asbestos (reportedly no risk to students), and is often in disrepair. Students, teachers, and community members have noted the challenges (and occasional absurdities) of maintaining this building. It is completely unadaptable to 21st century learning methods and technologies, and is outdated/antiquated in many respects, reflecting absolute non-compliance in terms of contemporary disabilities access expectations. ***Indeed, disabilities access is of paramount importance in planning for the future. Such considerations affect parents, grandparents, teachers/staff, and our students themselves. The status of our middle school stands in direct contrast to what is fair and right in a modern society that has fought hard for educational and occupational rights of our citizens with conditions affecting their mobility.***

The elementary school is in a slightly more advantageous condition having been built in 1955. The facility structure is in reasonably good shape, but also is reported to have encapsulated asbestos. The building has similar limitations in temperature regulation, and certainly is an inefficient structure with current repair concerns (e.g., water leakage) and additional operating costs likely to grow in the future. Educationally, the building continues to serve the basic educational needs of children relatively well, although there are obvious limits in flexible space utilization, a rather serious deficiency in ‘multipurpose’ and physical education options, and a clear need to upgrade library and multimedia learning options.

Ultimately, this building lacks modern learning spaces, and will progressively become increasingly outdated and in need of significant improvements.



The high school is the newest facility in the district (1966); posing no remediation hazards, it is nevertheless considered substantially larger than necessary (both now and based on future

enrollment projections), and is a further example of growing inefficiency given the size of our school district. Again, the building serves the basic educational needs of students, but is markedly inferior in terms of modern learning spaces, science/lab facilities, music and band space, and community gathering/performance auditorium resources. Our gymnasium is quite

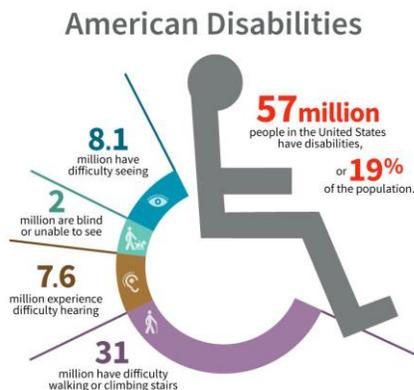
possibly the best feature of this physical facility overall; however, the condition of this gym is largely a function of recent capital improvements to the space including upgraded lighting, bleacher seating, and floor painting/wall padding. However, as has been pointed out repeatedly in recent years (by athletes and fans/observers), the floor arrangement remains a noticeable problem for competitive basketball (i.e., fans walking in front of team benches/coaches during competition), and the facility remains less accessible to those in wheelchairs, using walkers, needing crutches, or requiring assistance due to physical limitations.

Disability Awareness and Facilities Planning

The Rootstown schools have long provided a quality education to all individuals, preparing students to advance beyond the high school level into college, careers, or specialized training and military service. A comprehensive education plan includes attending to the needs of the ‘mainstream’ students progressing through the schools, while addressing--in equal fashion--the needs of those struggling with learning or physical challenges. Of course, this is a district challenge not unique to Rootstown; however, as part of an evaluation plan examining the ‘fitness’ of current facilities, focused attention to prospective students, community members, and teachers with physical disabilities is an important consideration in future decisions.



Community members have expressed substantial concerns regarding accessibility of our facilities. Issues emerge subtly and over time, yet cumulatively and insidiously influence the public perception of those in decision-making positions. Indeed, for a district representative to explain to a person in a wheelchair (or their family member attendant), “we have back of the high school access for



wheelchairs, and can wheel someone directly into the gymnasium” is inadequate. Community members have recounted numerous episodes where wheelchair bound visitors to the high school have been carried by family members and even Rootstown fans up or down stairs to gain entrance/exit to the facility. This courteous effort of friends and family is no substitute for district level awareness and responsibility. Our enthusiasm for sporting facility improvements and fund-raising for needed athletic equipment and resources certainly outweighs the consideration given to the needs of those with disabilities. We respectfully recognize that this is also a matter of degree (i.e., *many fewer individuals* with disabling conditions); however, it can be argued that our football

program has a long-standing history of losing (or, “*many fewer wins*”), yet this in no way curtails considerable efforts to raise standards (and money) in order to improve the chances for success.

The bottom line here, and one that must feature prominently in future facilities planning, we can do better as a district, and must think inclusively regarding the broader needs of those who are

sometimes outside the ‘mainstream’. Consideration of student needs--and maybe even more likely--the needs of student family members and even teachers, *must be prioritized*. Even short-term events (e.g., broken limbs; ACL injuries; traumatic head injury; etc.) require special consideration and accessibility within our schools. Moreover, as has most recently been pointed out by some parents in this community, a parent with a physical limitation could in no way ‘fully’ participate in open house or conferences for a child at the middle school or even the high school. Making arrangements to meet a parent on the ‘ground floor’ is certainly considerate and accommodating, but in essence disrespects parental rights to participate fully in the educational process involving his/her child.

“You don’t have building or bathroom access for a child in a wheelchair?”... “Can someone then help me get my child’s chair down the steps?”... “When was this building built?”

--Visiting parent questions at a Rootstown basketball event (2016)

Integrated Facilities and a Unified Campus Environment

The current 3-building setup is a poor way to operate a district of our size, and far from the most cost effective model. For smaller districts in particular, unifying separate buildings into a single integrated structure offers considerable savings and efficiencies in heating/cooling, food service organization, and maintenance personnel allocation and resource utilization. Currently, redundancies in heating systems and food service facilities, coupled with the need for space and resource sharing (e.g., elementary school concerts; lack of suitable gymnasium space at the elementary school) place limits on the potential of the district to operate at a much more cost-efficient level. All buildings suffer from HVAC issues and rely on separate inefficient systems for heating. No buildings have integrated cooling. Importantly, it is desirable to create an integrated campus environment, offering students and faculty alike a learning environment reflecting modern thermoregulatory options, updated learning facilities, and easier access to extracurricular resources (e.g., athletics; arts and music).

The state of Ohio survey, with its various findings, leads the committee to the strong conclusion that it is well past the time to upgrade our facilities. Given the aforementioned issues, it is reasonable to make plans to educate the community regarding the need for a new building initiative, and consider ways to capitalize on the strengths, interests, and citizens of this community in moving forward. [insert data].

Detailed Issues to Guide the Decision-Making Process

Throughout this 7-month process, several important issues were of paramount importance to the committee. In general, the objective was two-fold. First, identify options that maximize the educational value of the new facilities for our children. Second, establish a realistic appraisal of what the community at-large would be willing to support. Naturally, any improvements will require a voter-approved levy, so the solution must balance the school district’s desires against the funding willingness of the voters.

In no specific order, the committee spent considerable time on the issues identified in Table 2. Each issue is addressed more completely in the sections to follow.

Table 2.

Committee Issues

| Issue | Consensus |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Build new or renovate current buildings (or mixture) | Build New |
| Separate buildings or single K-12 building | Single K-12 |
| New athletic facilities/improvements | Prefer new |
| Auditorium, public gathering space (performances/meetings) | Yes |
| Gymnasiums | 2-3 (add elementary if possible) |
| Community space for citizens of Rootstown | Yes |
| Funding Options | |
| Traditional property tax levy | Yes/partial |
| Earned income tax (W-2 earnings) | Yes/partial |
| Site for New Buildings | |
| State Route 44 (Current Location) | Split |
| Off-site Location | Split |
| School Visitations | |
| Strongsville Middle School | Impressive design |
| Beaver Local Public Schools | Excellent K-12 |
| Coventry High School | Superb Auditorium |

Building Structure – Renovate, New, and How Many?

For any improvement...renovations, single, or multiple new buildings...the state’s budgeted funds are identical. The Ohio Facilities Construction Commission (OFCC) calculates a district’s total building square footage based on the number of students and future student projections. This allowable square footage is multiplied by a fixed construction cost budget per square foot to arrive at the project budget. The committee found through their work with GPD Group that building a single new K-12 building allows us to maximize the square footage used for student learning and to potentially have the most cost efficient options to operate. It must be noted that GPD has been present throughout the entire process, offering assistance in design concepts, funding, school visitation, site evaluation, and construction cost estimates (for further information regarding GPD portfolio and projects, see GPD.com). Having worked on previous school design-build projects (e.g., Coventry Schools; also Akron Public Schools), the support, experience, and insight of GPD personnel was important to the success of this overall committee process.



It is recognized that there are far too many unknowns and potentially unforeseen risks associated with renovating existing buildings. The district falls short on many current building codes, including materials used and ADA compliance (see 2010 ADA guidelines, ADA.gov). The

school is currently ‘grandfathered in’ and is able to *avoid* many requirements; however, a renovated building **MUST** meet the same regulations as a new building. Working with ADA facilities requirements (such as hallway width and door placement) can sometimes prove impossible. Clearly, new construction can easily be designed to meet current regulations, while our existing buildings pose unknown risks and potential cost overruns.

Auditorium

The school lacks a proper stage and auditorium facility. Embarrassingly, the high school uses the floor of the cafeteria. A 500 to 600-person auditorium would be a significant, meaningful upgrade with many possible uses throughout the school year. The State will co-fund the stage space, but will not split funding on a stand-alone auditorium seating area. The cost of funding an auditorium locally could approach \$4 million (this would be entirely a local funding initiative [LFI]). One possible alternative is the ‘cafetorium’ arrangement similar to what we have at the high school currently. In this option, cafeteria seating is rearranged to create auditorium seating. Since the cafeteria is included in the state-funded building cost, this is essentially a no-cost possibility. A proper stage could be included, but seating is still on a cafeteria floor.

A much more novel approach has been attempted and is proving successful in a small number of schools. By installing telescoping auditorium seating (similar in concept to gymnasium seating, see **A** and **B** at right) and making the main auditorium area classroom suitable (seating includes fold out table surfaces--see **C** at right), a proper 600-person auditorium can be achieved within the state budget allocation. The only locally funded cost is the seating, estimated at approximately \$50k. ***The committee strongly endorses this auditorium model to achieve the best possible facility with the lowest possible cost.***



Athletic Facility Upgrades

When considering building construction, it is necessary to evaluate the school campus as a whole. One of the most visible and publicly accessed aspects of the campus is the athletic facilities. Many more community members see, visit and enjoy our athletic facilities as they come to support the Rovers across all levels of athletic competition--youth, middle school, and high school. As a potential marketing tool, it is the consensus of the committee (with rather strong support from many community members) that improved stadium and field options are necessary and make good sense when restructuring the district.

Regardless of site choice (i.e., current location or move), the committee recommends complete and similar athletic facility upgrades. One of the biggest benefits of moving (see optional site choice below) would be the land to accommodate a full-sized stadium and field for football and soccer use, plus a full-sized 8-lane track. Without question, this is one of the single most commonly expressed comments regarding Rootstown's athletic facilities, "there is no usable track--either for our athletes or community members."



Recommending complete athletic facility upgrades

The current stadium site may not have sufficient space for more than a 6-lane track (i.e., this requires further design consultation), although *incorporating a new all-weather surface into a design plan is imperative*. This is one area where school facilities clearly impact the community--

"Our track-and-field programs are among the school's historically most successful...and where do they train? On a parking lot...and even that needs upgraded."

providing an open and available space for community members to walk, run, or gather. Creative thinking and thoughtful planning could nicely integrate a track facility that benefits the community, with blended spaces for park-like seating and even a covered pavilion. Financially, a benefit of remaining on the current St. Rt. 44 site is that a facility footprint already exists, with possible savings of the locally-funded burden. A completely new stadium/track complex is estimated at approximately \$2.8MM (based on similar,

recent builds at other NE Ohio schools). Upgrading our current stadium could cost between \$1.0-1.9 million, yielding a potential savings of at least \$900,000.

A stadium locker room (with proposed locker room space for visiting teams), patron restrooms, and centralized concessions are recommended at either site. This would greatly improve convenience to patrons and enhance the competitive experience of our sports teams and competitors. The estimated cost of this facilities initiative is \$400,000.

Given the recent success of the Rootstown wrestling program, and anticipated growth of the sport in the future, a complete wrestling room and weight room complex is considered a much-needed improvement. The current wrestling facility is suitable (and clearly has not impeded program success), but an expanded wrestling complex with a new weight/training room would be of particular value. Importantly, improved facilities should allow for increased health and safety for participants. A complete modern facility would require approximately \$400,000.

It is of additional importance to consider the needs of our baseball and softball programs. Both are active programs, with considerable investment in facilities and resources at the youth levels.

Community members have invested heavily in the Gracie Field complex, and this stands as one of the most outstanding parks of its kind in the area. The high school facilities, however, are lacking. In particular, the baseball diamond is commonly regarded as the worst facility in the PTC, and a recent series of aerial views of PTC and other ball diamonds underscores this observation. Field quality is poor, and positioning adjacent to the elementary school is not optimal. Community members complain vehemently about the disregard for this facility, and have repeatedly expressed interest in working together to remedy the field status.



Site Choice: Remain on St. Rt. 44?

The state of Ohio Dept. of Education recommends at least 50 acres of land for a school district of our size. The current location on St. Rt. 44 is 36 acres, with most of the land utilized, although there are fragmented unused green spaces. A building plan on this site will require significant planning and creative space utilization to integrate buildings and extra-curricular facilities within a new and optimized campus concept. Obviously, traffic can be heavy and difficult at times, particularly with NEOMED and Biomed high school sharing an access traffic light with the Rootstown schools. In addition, this stretch of St. Rt. 44, with traffic influenced by Giant Eagle, Dollar General, Circle-K, and two banks to the south of the schools, is reasonably active throughout the day. Moreover, the new addition of Dunkin Donuts on the West side of Rt. 44 will likely compound traffic patterns. Unequivocally, there remains uncertainty regarding how 44 will be maintained or expanded in the future. Importantly, and requiring much further investigation and deliberation, the land is central to the community and could potentially be of significant value to the district and community at large if made available for expanded commercial businesses.

Alternate Site: Move to a New Location?

To fully vet this issue, a site search and survey was initiated in Spring, 2017. At the time, 8 sites were identified as possible relocation sites. Six (6) sites were on the market, and two (2) were privately owned not for sale. Each of the 6 available sites was eliminated due to untenable issues with the space, including railroad right of ways, high tension power lines cutting through the property, protected wetlands and excessive clean-up problems. Of the two (2) privately owned sites, only one was determined eligible for potential sale. This site, the 79 acre lot at the northwest intersection of Cook Rd. and New Milford Rd. is a potentially prime piece of property. In terms of space, this site allows for a modern, expansive campus for new facilities and more

“The baseball field has ‘potholes’ in the outfield, the field itself gets hard like asphalt, and part of the parking lot is actually in play...but our dugouts, they are nicely done”

Former varsity baseball player and community member

than adequate parking. Based on market-value, real estate estimates and engineering survey estimates, the site would require an additional \$2.3MM to procure and prep.

The committee recommends a full traffic analysis to determine the adequacy of streets for increased school traffic for a school on that site. Potential upgrades might be needed to address traffic patterns or intersection issues at this proposed site.

It is worth noting that a proposed joint economic development district (JEDD) has previously been addressed, although the likelihood of this initiative is uncertain at this time. Nevertheless, such a venture, if agreed to by all parties involved, could yield benefits for the Rootstown Local School District in the future (and the Rootstown community) if the school chose to relocate and make the current location available for suitable commerce. Such an arrangement is obviously not in place now, and any future financial benefit is contingent on selling the present-day school lot, attracting, and developing actual new business growth in Rootstown. Yet, the entire opportunity is not possible unless the Rootstown Schools relocate. The market value of the current school lot is estimated at \$1.6MM, but those dollars are not included in any fiscal models for the development of new schools at this time.