

# From campaign to construction



*Liberty Center Local (Henry) Superintendent Dr. Tod A. Hug, center, points to an architect's rendering of the district's new \$42.6 million K-12 facility, set to open in December. Louise Dalton and Jack Krueger, also pictured, co-chaired the levy campaign.*

## Grassroots effort led Liberty Center Local plan

*Scott Gerfen, assistant editor*

Visitors to the **Liberty Center Local (Henry) Schools'** website have been keeping an eye on the future. A stationary video camera set above the campus captures the ongoing construction of the district's new K-12 building.

Members of the rural community, located about 40 miles southwest of Toledo, are eagerly awaiting the finished product, a 158,000-square-foot facility taking shape directly behind the existing school.

"Residents feel like they have a stake in this," Liberty Center Local board member **Jeff Benson** said. "The people have been

so involved in this. They've given their thoughts and opinions about the school: how it should be built and where it should be built."

Site work on the \$42.6 million building began in August 2015. When OSBA Journal staff toured the facility in April, contractors were well on their way to meeting the December move-in date, adding drywall, door frames, heating and cooling systems and the cable and wires needed for high-tech 21st century classrooms.

But long before construction crews laid the foundation and



*Liberty Center Local high school students now learn in a building designed when the open classroom concept was popular in the 1970s. The new K-12 building is more traditional, with classrooms on both sides of the hallways and extended learning centers.*

erected the building's steel skeleton, a committee of volunteers got to work, convincing the community that there was a real need for a new learning environment.

The grassroots effort paved the way for passage of a 37-year, 8.4-mill bond issue and 0.5-mill permanent improvement levy for building maintenance in May 2014, resulting in \$18.5 million. More than 60% of the construction funding, \$36.5 million, comes from the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission (OFCC) and Ohio School Facilities Commission.

"There's no way of duplicating what you need today in these old schools," said **Jack Krueger**, a 1954 Liberty Center graduate who co-chaired the building campaign. "When I was in school, we had one secretary, and she was everything. The old timers didn't understand why we needed all this. And they didn't understand what the state was requiring from school districts."

Approximately 1,200 students currently share the district's connected buildings, some of which date back to the 1950s. Students in fifth through 12th grades occupy one of the newer structures after a fire in 1972 destroyed the original Liberty Center High School, built in the late 1800s.

Liberty Center Local replaced the building with the open-classroom concept, futuristic at the time, in which large groups of students shared a classroom with several teachers. In the mid-1970s, however, perceptions changed, and districts nationwide returned to the basics and more traditional school settings that matched the conservative revolt against the cultural and political revolutions of the 1960s and early 1970s.

"The board, at the time, caught a lot of hell for that," Krueger said. "They didn't deserve it. It was what they were led to believe."

Something also unique to the 1970s high school design: It has no windows. Tasked with designing buildings that were more energy efficient, school architects at the time didn't realize the side effects of windowless classrooms. Some studies have shown that students in these classrooms don't perform as well

as their peers in rooms illuminated by natural light.

The district added a larger spectator gym, administration offices, storage space and a media center in 1995. However, most of the structures are showing their age, including the elementary building with its corroding and leaking pipes. The buildings have outdated technology, and lighting and maintenance costs continue to increase.

In 2007, the district learned it was eligible for state construction funding. According to the OFCC website, a district's priority for state aid is based on its three-year average adjusted valuation per pupil, as calculated by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). ODE ranks districts annually from lowest to highest.

"A district's percentile ranking determines when the district will be served by CFAP (Classroom Facilities Assistance Program)," according to the OFCC website. "Also, for most districts, the portion of the basic project cost paid by the district is equal to its percentile ranking."

However, voters in Henry and Fulton counties weren't ready to pay for new schools. In November 2007, they defeated an 8.61-mill bond issue that would have raised \$14.5 million. The state would have contributed \$18.3 million to the project. Less than a year later, voters rejected a 4.98-mill bond issue for \$7.66 million.



*Superintendent Dr. Tod A. Hug, right, receives an update on construction as workers installed HVAC systems, lighting and wiring in April.*



Former Superintendent **Kristi A. Thompson** decided to give the community more time. However, when the board decided to return to voters in 2014, a campaign committee made up of more than 30 community members was ready to carry out a consultant's action plan.

"If a community can see the need and accept the need ... that's huge," said Superintendent Dr. **Tod A. Hug**, who was hired in April 2015. "Secondly, what's it going to cost? People don't care until you're reaching for their wallet."

The Liberty Center Local Schools Levy Organization Committee set out to answer those questions with building tours, coffee chats, firehouse and church meetings and a web-based calculator that showed residents how much they would pay for the new K-12 building. The theme for the campaign was "The Need is Real."

"The key was really educating people," campaign committee co-chair **Louise Dalton** said. "We brought them in the buildings and showed them what was going on. They'd say, 'OK, maybe it's not as good as we remember it being.'"

Residents even opened their homes to informational meetings.

"I would ask someone to host, and then it was up to them to get people to their house," said Dalton, a retired Liberty Center Local teacher. "They could invite as many as they wanted to invite. Those who came were more willing to ask questions because it wasn't such a large group."

The community input didn't end with the election victory. Multiple committees made up of residents, teachers and students gave feedback on interior design, furnishings and playgrounds. The elementary school playground now features a zip line, something that students wanted.

The biggest debate of the postelection discussion involved the location of the new school. Some wanted it built miles away from the campus, adjacent to a privately funded sports complex used by the high school's baseball, softball and track and field teams. However, that would leave the football complex, which eventually will undergo \$500,000 in renovations, on its own. After much consideration and feedback from the community, the board settled on the district's current location.

"It's a very traditional school setting," Hug said of the new building. "We didn't move into the 21st century scheme by looking at pods or collaborative hallways. There are double-loaded corridors with extended learning centers in each of the wings, so there can be some collaborative work that takes place."

The school board selected Minster-based architect Garmann/Miller & Associates and Lima-based Touchstone

Construction Planning & Management as construction manager at risk, which handles hiring the contractors for a guaranteed maximum project price.

"It really makes for a more streamlined process," Hug said. "It's the construction manager's choice on who does the work. If they go over, it comes out of their pocket. The construction manager is looking out for the school district, knowing it can't go over this price."

Garmann/Miller & Associates offered free conceptual drawings and a 3-D virtual tour of the new school, which can be viewed at <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/98183>.

"You definitely want a good construction manager," said Benson, who works in the HVAC industry. "I've seen sites where it's really bad and others where it's clean and done right. Our site is really clean and well-maintained."



*Students in a Liberty Center Middle School gym class play a game of floor hockey. The current middle school will remain in use until the end of the 2017-2018 school year.*

The current building will stay through the end of the 2017-2018 school year. Once crews complete demolition, much of the area will become parking space. Areas added in 1995, including the gymnasium and offices, will remain. Sports teams will continue to use the gym, and classroom space will be used for prekindergarten students and administrative offices.

Although a fence surrounds the construction site, students and staff can watch the progress through windows at the rear of the current facilities. Their learning environment is about to dramatically change.

"As a board member, I want the best for our teachers and kids," Benson said. "If we give them the right learning facility and help teachers provide the best in education, then we're doing something good." ■