Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart Schools

Home of the Mustangs

Facilities Planning FAQs

Straightforward answers about our facility needs, options, and next steps

WHERE THE FACILITIES PLANNING PROCESS STAND S

After several months of planning, our school board is considering a facilities investment to address our needs. No final decision has been made, and our board is still reviewing facility needs, possible solutions, costs, community feedback, funding options, and potential tax impacts.

These FAQs bring together questions raised during the facilities-planning process and community open houses to date. Information will be updated as the plan takes shape and more details become available. If the plan moves forward, a referendum will be required to approve the bonds that will be required to pay for the improvements.

Why are we planning now?

Why are we looking at facility improvements?

Many parts of our school are aging and need attention. We are looking at heating, ventilation and cooling (HVAC); indoor air quality and temperature control; plumbing and electrical systems; accessibility; safety and security; parent and bus traffic during drop-off and pick-up; and whether our current learning spaces support how students are taught today. Our planning process is meant to look at the full picture and compare responsible long-term options while incorporating stakeholder feedback along the way. A recent scientific survey showed that a strong majority of BLHS residents believe that our facilities need investments and that it is better to move forward now rather than wait until more problems develop and costs increase.

Why consider action now?

The longer we wait to address the needs, the more that problems accumulate and costs increase. A comprehensive facility assessment and indoor air quality testing found several areas that need attention. Our school still relies on aging steam boilers and piping, unit ventilators, and radiators that don't consistently provide fresh air, limited air conditioning, aging electrical equipment, accessibility limitations, and drainage concerns. Proactive planning can reduce the risk of emergency repairs and repeated disruptions while school is in session that impact our students and staff.

How were these needs identified?

We have completed a facility condition assessment, reviewed educational and space needs compared to what the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) recommend, evaluated our infrastructure, studied demographic information, developed early cost estimates, and gathered input from staff, and other stakeholders. Our Facilities Steering Committee, made up of school board members, staff, and community members, used that information to recommend a preferred option for our school board to consider.

What happens if the work is delayed or a future referendum is not approved?

We would continue using and maintaining the current facility with the limited resources available to the district. However, security, accessibility, comfort, and educational needs will remain and continue to get worse the longer we wait to address them. Delaying larger improvements could also mean more problem emerge, emergency repairs and higher costs later. If a major system failed, we might need to make temporary operating changes while repairs were completed, which will affect our students and staff.

Options, scope and design

What options have been considered?

We have looked at several plans, including continued maintenance, targeted repairs, major renovation, new construction and various combinations of those approaches. Our Facilities Steering Committee's recommendation would keep and connect to our existing varsity gym and nearby support spaces, while replacing the older portions of the building to the east, north, and west of the gym. Our school board has not made a final decision on a project.

Why not renovate the existing building?

Renovation is still an option our school board may consider. However, addressing our building and program needs would require extensive work, including opening walls, floors and ceilings to replace mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, improving accessibility, and updating finishes. After those steps are taken, there still may be major investments needed in the next decade, as the building will continue to age. These costs currently exceed a threshold of 60% of new construction.

What if we only replace the HVAC system?

HVAC is an important need, but replacing it would still require major work above ceilings and inside walls, floors and exterior areas. An HVAC-only project would not fully address plumbing, electrical service, accessibility, security, site traffic, building layout, or learning spaces. If we are going to address HVAC, the lowest-cost option is to address other interior issues rather than start another project from scratch in a couple years.

Is there a concept the community can review?

Yes. Early concept diagrams have been created to study how spaces could connect, how traffic could move around the site, how construction might be phased, and what the work could cost. These are planning concepts, not final designs. If our school board moves a project forward, staff, students and community members would have more opportunities to provide input before designs are finalized. Once the school board takes formal action, a website will be launched with complete information about the plans with a target launch of January.

Would athletic facilities be improved?

The preferred concept keeps our existing varsity gym and connects it to the proposed facility. Our gym floor and seating have also received recent long-term maintenance investments. At this point, planning is focused mainly on our school building and its educational, infrastructure, accessibility, safety, and security needs. Any additional athletic improvements are not considered to be a high priority at this time.

How could a new or improved facility strengthen safety and security?

One goal is to create a clearly marked, secure and welcoming entrance connected to our main office, which many other schools in our area already have. Visitors would check in and be verified before entering student areas. Planning also considers better separation between public and secure areas, improved access control and camera coverage, and safer bus and parent drop-off and pick-up routes. Final security features would be determined during design.

Cost, taxes and funding

What is the potential project cost?

Our school board understands the balance of addressing our needs while being sensitive to the tax impact on our residents. To fully address our needs, we reviewed multiple options and are considering an investment of up to $65.7 million. Our preferred planning concept, which includes new construction of the core building while keeping and connecting to our existing varsity gym, has an early total project estimate of about $65.7 million in 2026 dollars. No final project, bond amount, or spending authorization has been formally approved at the board level.

How was the early cost estimate developed?

The estimate is based on the facility assessment of educational and space needs and the professional services required for design and construction management. Comparisons have been made with other rural school projects to learn more about costs per square foot and the impact of inflation on materials Our Facilities Steering Committee and school board have reviewed this information, and community input, including a district-wide survey, as part of the process. Costs would become more detailed as the scope and design are refined.

What could this cost taxpayers?

Final tax impacts have not been set pending formal action by the school board. However, the recommended option with a total project cost of $65.7 million would result in an annual tax increase of $4 for an average home value of $204,542 and $4.16 per homesteaded acre. Examples for different types and values of property are included in the presentation given at the open house which can be viewed on the district’s website.

What is the Ag2School Tax Credit?

The State of Minnesota's School Building Bond Agricultural Credit, commonly called the Ag2School Tax Credit, is a 70% tax credit provided to all agricultural property except the house, garage, and one acre surrounding the home. This is not a tax deduction – it's a dollar-for-dollar automatic tax credit from the state with no application required. This state credit reduces the contribution percentage for agricultural landowners. If our residents approve a building bond referendum, approximately 55.14% of the referendum's total principal and interest will be covered by the state's Ag2School credit.

What happened to the levy voters approved in 2023?

The 2023 approved operating levy supports day-to-day school operations, including staffing, instructional programs, and supplies. School districts use state funding and local operating levies for classroom needs, and use bonds to pay for building improvements in the same way as a mortgage works for a house. **An easy way to remember the difference is that levies are for learning and bonds are for buildings.**

Could revenue from the proposed constitutional amendment on the November ballot pay for this project?

Voters approved a constitutional amendment for the Permanent School Trust Fund this past November. The distribution percentage will increase, and additional dollars will be given to school districts on a per pupil basis. Although these additional dollars will be helpful, these additional funds are anticipated to equate to an additional $15,000 per year for BLHS.

Could local contractors bid on the work?

Yes! We welcome interest from qualified local contractors and suppliers. Any construction bidding would need to follow Minnesota public-bidding requirements along with project specifications, licensing, bonding, insurance and other legal requirements. By statute, public schools are required to take the lowest responsible bid. If a project moves into design and construction, bid packages and schedules would be shared with local contractors.

Enrollment, capacity and schedule

Are there enough students to support the proposed facility?

Enrollment and demographic information are certainly part of the planning process. The current data shows approximately 425 K-12 students in 2025-26, while also recognizing uncertainty around birth trends, population changes, and open enrollment. The goal is to size our building responsibly for projected enrollment while keeping enough flexibility for changing programs and future needs.

How many students would the proposed school serve?

Our current planning assumption is a facility sized for about 425 students through the planning period. That is a planning capacity, not a promise of future enrollment. However, this number is based on current enrollment and future demographics projections.

Would a new facility increase enrollment?

A facility can support the student experience, programming, and our ability to compete for students, but we are not assuming an investment in our facilities would automatically increase enrollment. Future enrollment would still depend on demographics, available housing, family decisions, open enrollment, and other factors.

When could a new or substantially improved facility open?

No opening date has been approved. Early planning has looked at a phased construction and move-in process that could extend into 2030, but the actual construction schedule would be based on design, bidding and construction needs. It would be a priority to limit disruptions in daily education. If the project advances, we would publish a confirmed schedule.

Community participation and next steps

When will our school board decide what to do next?

Our school board will decide whether to move forward after reviewing the preferred option, costs, funding information, potential tax impacts, results from the scientific survey, and other community feedback. Any decision to call a bond referendum would happen at a public school board meeting.

How can residents share questions or comments?

Questions and comments can also be sent through our district office, and we will do our best to get back to you within 48 hours.

Where can residents find the latest information?

We will share our facility findings, concepts, costs, tax information, meeting materials, engagement opportunities, and updates through our official facilities planning communications and school board agendas. Because details may change as planning continues, residents should use the most up to date information.

Planning information may change as we continue to review options and gather community input.