



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANEY

A crowd of about 4,400 people watched the Hermiston High School Class of 2018 graduate Thursday, June 7 at the Toyota Center in Kennewick.

Groundbreaking for Umatilla school renovations



STAFF PHOTO BY JADE MCDOWELL

Supporters of Umatilla School District pose with a golden shovel in front of Clara Brownell Middle School on Thursday to mark the start of construction on Umatilla schools.

New graduation venue had pros, cons

District begins to consider location for next year's ceremony

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

The Hermiston School District wrapped up its first out-of-state graduation on June 7, successfully getting 342 students across the stage at the Toyota Center in Kennewick. Now, school officials are taking stock of the event, and considering their options going forward.

Though most acknowledged that the high school gymnasium could no longer hold the growing graduating classes, many debates preceded the move to a Washington state graduation, including looking at holding the ceremony at several Hermiston venues, such as Kennison Field or the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center, before the school board voted 6-1 to move the ceremony across the river.

Hermiston High School principal Tom Spoo said he was satisfied with the ceremony, and that things had gone largely as planned.

"Almost to a T," he said. "The only thing that didn't go the way I intended was

simply time. The kids ended up speaking a little longer than anticipated, I went a little longer. Outside that, it went well."

Spoo said he started the ceremony a few minutes late because of another unexpected issue — traffic coming from Hermiston to Kennewick.

"We didn't anticipate it being that bad," he said. "The kids got there a little late. We were ready to go by seven, but I felt that there were still parents that weren't there."

The other issue, he said, was getting the crowd of more than 4,000 reunited with their graduates after the ceremony.

"The reception outside was unbelievably crowded," he said. "We would need to plan that differently."

Spoo said he, the board and interim superintendent Tricia Mooney have yet to discuss where they will hold graduation next year.

"I think we assess," he said. "That decision has not taken place, and I don't know when it will."

Spoo said he and Mooney did a lot of planning leading up to the event, both in training the students and collaborating with Washington schools superintendents that already held their graduations at the center.

"I was very keen on

wanting this to go very well," Spoo said. "No matter how well it goes, there's always going to be naysayers. So I was very adamant with the kids that I wanted this to go well, and we wanted to be respectful."

Spoo said with many logistical issues, they had to start from scratch.

"Transportation was a big, big deal," Spoo said. "It's not something we'd ever dealt with at graduation before. I can't tell you how many times I changed the leave times, the load times."

They also had to provide transportation for the band and its equipment, as well as for families who didn't have a way to get up there.

He said about 20 family members rode the bus that the district provided.

He said they had to make certain changes to the ceremony as well, which included some slightly stricter rules.

"We've always kind of allowed the kids to be kids again, throw their caps and use silly string. But up there, it's not something that was allowed. In many cases, they go right from one graduation to another," he said. "I worked on the seniors all year, that this isn't our house."

Spoo said they compromised, and as the seniors

turned their tassels, administrators tossed several beach balls into the sea of graduates.

"We wanted to do something fun," he said.

While the Toyota Center handled most of the setup, including providing chairs for the graduates and podiums for the speakers, there were some changes in the procedure, including the way the graduates were photographed, and coordinating with the Project Graduation planners, who host the class graduation party.

Some factors unique to the Toyota Center came into play, too. Audience members could get up during the ceremony and purchase snacks and drinks.

Spoo said he hadn't considered whether that was a distraction from the ceremony.

"Maybe because I wasn't thinking about that piece of it," he said. "I saw people moving, but any kind of noise never bothered me."

HERMISTON HERALD

The ceremonial start to bond construction at Umatilla schools began Thursday at Clara Brownell Middle School in Umatilla with a groundbreaking.

The project was paid for by a \$10 million bond the community passed in 2016, \$800,000 extra cash raised by selling the bonds at a premium and \$4 million in matching state funds. The district structured the bonds so that taxpayers will pay their current rate longer than previously expected, but will not see an increase in that rate.

"We really worked hard to only ask for what we really needed," superintendent Heidi Sipe said.

At Clara Brownell renovations will include new plumbing, electrical wiring, HVAC system, flooring, windows and roofing. At McNary Heights Elementary School construction will include a new office and new standalone gym so that the old gym can be a dedicated cafeteria, giving more time for eating and physical education.

All three Umatilla schools will also receive new front entrances with upgraded security. Everything but the new gym and new office at McNary is expected to be done before school starts in the fall. Construction on the gym is expected to wrap up in December.

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School district narrows scope of potential bond projects

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

A group of community members and district employees trying to help the Hermiston School District come up with its next bond request has narrowed their options down.

Stacey Stanek and Phil Hamm, co-chairs of the Hermiston School District Facilities Planning Committee, presented two "project mixes" to the school board June 11 and asked the board to approve the facility master plan.

Project mix "A" has four goals: replacing Rocky Heights Elementary School, renovating Sandstone Middle School, renovating Highland Hills Elementary School and expanding Hermiston High School.

Project mix "B" has all the same projects as "A," with one exception. Instead of renovating Highland Hills, project mix "B" calls for replacing the school.

District Operations Manager Brad Wayland said the board would now review the information presented to them, and likely ask him for more details about the potential costs, and what a bond structure would look like for each of these projects.

"I anticipate several months of back and forth between myself, the board

and Superintendent (Tricia Mooney)," he said.

Wayland said the goals of the facilities planning committee were to update the district's facilities master plan, determine short- and long-term capital projects, and develop and recommend a potential bond package to the board.

"I anticipate several months of back and forth between myself, the board and Superintendent"

Brad Wayland, District Operations Manager

After making presentations to parent and community organizations, the committee held two public meetings where people could come and ask questions about the potential projects. The committee then voted on a list of priorities based on their research.

"Number one was replacing Rocky Heights, and

number two was renovating Sandstone," committee co-chair Stacey Stanek told the board.

Stanek said the third priority was building a new elementary school, and fourth was expanding the high school.

But Wayland said that looking at finances, building a new elementary school would have limited the district's ability to complete the first two projects. Therefore, the committee voted on a pool of 13 different project mixes.

"The committee rapidly realized we didn't know the exact numbers of what we could spend, but had ballpark figures of what to spend to keep taxes stable," he said.

At the school board meeting Monday, the committee members said project mix "A" had an estimated cost of around \$67 million, and project mix "B" had a projected cost of between \$75 million and \$90 million.

"Without a stable tax rate, we can't really do project mix 'B,'" Stanek said.

Wayland said he didn't know what the exact cost of each project would be, because the numbers were based on current dollar values, and didn't factor in inflation.

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