

Repurposing strategy for Cosmos School revealed

- By Amy Wilde for the Independent Review, December 4, 2018

On Nov. 26, the ACGC School Board got its first glimpse of what upcoming renovations at the Cosmos Learning Center might look like.

The School Board heard from architect Gary Hay, Regional Learning Center Director Bailey Rettmann and ORB Project Executive Kim Barse regarding the results of an extensive evaluation of the facility last summer. The Southwest/West Central Service Cooperative, which leases the property from the ACGC Board, operates a school for 60-65 children with special needs at the former Cosmos Elementary School. The building has deficiencies related to its age and the size and layout of its rooms that make it less-than-optimal for special education use, Hay, Barse and Rettmann said.

Last summer, the Cosmos Learning Center program received a \$5 million grant from the state legislature to upgrade and renovate the facility. The Hay Dobbs architectural firm determined to entirely repurpose all 53,000 square feet of the building would require more than twice as much money. The SW/WC co-op had to take a pragmatic look at how much space was required for 65 students and staff, and where to prioritize the renovations.

Most of the structural problems in the building's 1954 and 1964 construction lie in the north wings, where classrooms and a large gymnasium are located. Those areas require new roofs and extensive masonry repair. By contrast, the south portion of the building had more recent repairs and will not cost as much to renovate.

For security reasons, it will also be necessary to relocate the offices closer to the front entry and to renovate classrooms to accommodate the smaller number of students in most special education classes. The gym is also too large for the smaller classes, and it would make sense to repurpose the former music room for indoor recreation, Rettmann said. A secured outdoor recreation area is also part of the eventual plans.

Barse said that his firm had conducted an open house in Cosmos to field questions and gather input from the community about the upcoming project. A meeting with Cosmos officials was slated for late November. The project should not affect the portion of school property currently being leased by a taxidermy business. Rettmann said that the \$5 million grant would go entirely toward construction,

with the SW/WC co-op picking up the cost of furnishings, fixtures and fees. Renovated heating systems will also be part of the project.

“Essentially when we get done with this structure, you will have a brand new building,” said Hay.

If the number of students served in the cooperative’s five (soon to be six) special education program sites increases, additional funds could be sought in the future to add on to the Cosmos facility.

“We are putting \$5 million into this site, so we are committed to it,” said Rettmann.

School Superintendent Nels Onstad commended the presenters for their work on behalf of the district’s Cosmos property.