

Fine Arts Facility Proposal Presented By APS Patrons to Board of Education

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Auburn Public Schools (APS) patrons presented a proposal to the Board of Education Monday, Feb. 11, for a fine arts facility.

Students who participate in the fine arts programs and their parents were among the about 20 attendees at the meeting.

"This was addressed 45 years ago. This board needs to act on a performing arts facility bond only. The issue failed in 2008 because of other attachments," said Dale Thomas. Thomas, an Auburn High School graduate, is part of several generations of a family who has attended and graduated from Auburn High School.

"I support all Auburn High School activities, athletic and non-athletic. More students receive scholarships to continue their education in performing arts activities because of the support they receive. We've had more district champions, state qualifiers and top students in performing arts than athletics. Those students work just as hard as anyone else in the district," Thomas said. He showed a copy of the 1968 school yearbook which showed an architect's drawing of an outside view of the proposed "new" high school, now the current high school. The drawing showed a fine arts facility/auditorium as part of the design. The high school was completed in 1971, but without a performing arts center. It was thought that the first addition to the building would be a performing arts facility, Thomas said.

Late in the 1998-1999 school year, Performing Arts Center, Inc. was formed by APS patrons interested in supporting the addition of a performing arts center to the current high school building. Contributions were received. A position paper was written to explain the need for such a facility and an action plan was compiled. Davis Design was paid \$7,500 to provide a floor plan and a plan view for such a facility. Two options were prepared. The first option had 600 seats, 26,800 square feet and estimated construction cost was \$3.752 million. The second option had 600 seats, 29,400 square feet and estimated construction cost of \$4.116 million. Efforts to gain school board support did not gain traction.

In May 2008, a performing arts center was proposed as one of three options in a school bond election. It failed by eight votes. A facility to seat 600 persons was proposed at a cost not to exceed \$2.5 million.

The first option, to add classroom space and other facilities at the high school and at Calvert Elementary School was approved. The third option of a new practice gymnasium was not approved.

Pastor Jonathan Rathjen shared a proposal he presented to the Fine Arts Boosters in late January. Rathjen has two children in high school and one in middle school. The family has lived in Auburn since March 2001. Their children participate in both fine arts and athletic programs. Their activities include choir, show choir, band, one-act play, spring musical, softball, soccer and basketball.

The proposal called for the APS school board and administration to establish improvement and/or expansion of the district's fine arts facility.

Rathjen presented some rationale for the proposal

–The 2008 vote indicated that there was substantial interest in improved/expanded fine arts

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facilities by APS patrons.

–The district’s current facilities do not adequately support fine arts activities, including practices, concerts and performances.

Vocal and instrumental music concerts are mostly held in the gymnasiums at Calvert Elementary School and the senior high school.

“Gymnasiums are athletic facilities. They are not designed acoustically for performing or listening to concerts,” Rathjen said.

The auditorium at the former middle school, now the APS Central Office, built in 1937, lacks adequate seating for vocal music or band concerts.

“It also seems to be in disrepair as evidence by the inadequate heating for the local performance of the one-act play in November (2012). Many who attended wore their coats,” Rathjen said.

–In his training and education as a pastor, he said he learned that competition for limited space, resources and time sometimes caused conflict.

“When fine arts groups need to use the athletic facilities to prepare for or conduct performances, they displace athletic practices/activities. This potentially causes hard feelings/conflict between staff and maybe students as well. I don’t think anyone needs more conflict in our lives,” Rathjen said.

–APS has skilled/competent teachers who have done a great job in teaching and developing the God-given, natural abilities of district students.

“Our students have done well in various fine arts competitions. Improved/expanded facilities do not necessarily mean better programs, however, I believe that improved/expanded fine arts facilities would be a vote of confidence for the good things happening in the district’s fine arts programs and would help support and encourage the future development and success of our students in these areas,” Rathjen concluded.

He said he had no timeline in mind for improved/expanded fine arts facilities, but sooner would be better than later.

Because of the closeness of the 2008 vote, Rathjen hoped that the school board established a facility in its functions and actions so that, whether as a short- or long-term goal, efforts can move ahead in various ways to start fundraising. He indicated he was willing to help in such efforts.

“It’s been interesting to hear and see people’s reactions when I’ve talked with them about this issue in recent weeks. People’s reactions have generally been positive. But it also seems to me that there’s a certain level of skepticism with regarding to whether a performing arts center will ever be built here. Given the history, I certainly understand that reaction,” Rathjen explained. Families in Auburn have thought about and worked on the conception of a performing arts center for a long time, he said.

“It appears to me that at least two generations of students have gone through our school system without the benefit of such a facility since the new high school was built. The past is the past. We can’t turn back the clock, but must move on. Our school district’s motto is ‘Our Children...Our Future.’ I think that’s a good place to keep our focus when it comes to motivation for moving ahead with a commitment to such a facility sooner than later,” Rathjen said.

He noted that of seven schools Auburn students typically competed against in sports, four had facilities dedicated to the performing arts (Falls City, Nebraska City, Fairbury and Wahoo); and three did not (Ashland-Greenwood, Conestoga and Syracuse), all of whom would like to have a facility.

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Rathjen suggested appointing a “fact-finding team” to consist of a school board member, a member of the school’s foundation and willing volunteers.

“This team would investigate the current costs and other factors related to building a performing arts center and report back to the board for action to make such a facility a designated priority,” he said.

Rathjen thanked the school board for its time.

“I know there are many competing interests and factors that you must weigh and balance when it comes to the operations and infrastructure of the school district. I’m thankful for your willingness to share your God-given time and abilities in doing so for the benefit of our children and ultimately our communities,” he concluded.

“We need to figure out a way to get fundraising efforts going,” Dr. Mike Zaruba, school board member, said later in the meeting.

“It was disappointing to come down to eight votes (in 2008). My hope is to have an improved voter turnout for any bond vote on a performing arts facility. The fine arts facility is a high priority. We will work on making all of this work, but we need help from the public,” Dr. Zaruba said.