

North Penn offering high school tours, forum ahead of referendum

[R thereporteronline.com/2023/11/20/north-penn-offering-high-school-tours-forum-ahead-of-referendum](https://thereporteronline.com/2023/11/20/north-penn-offering-high-school-tours-forum-ahead-of-referendum)

Dan Sokil

November 20, 2023



Former North Penn High School Principal Pete Nicholson, holding screen, and Superintendent Todd Bauer lead a group of area residents on a tour of the high school, while showing renderings of potential NPHS renovations. (Photo courtesy of NPSD)



By [Dan Sokil](https://thereporteronline.com) | dsokil@thereporteronline.com | The Reporter

PUBLISHED: November 20, 2023 at 5:18 p.m. | UPDATED: November 20, 2023 at 5:19 p.m.

LANSDALE — If you live in the North Penn School District, get out your calendar — several key dates are coming soon.

District officials are inviting the public to a public forum and tours of North Penn High School to see up close the need for pending renovations ahead of a voter referendum in January.

“Now that the board has approved that we go to a special election, what does ‘Yes’ mean, and what does ‘No’ mean? We have said that not doing anything at the high school, is not an option,” said Superintendent Todd Bauer.

“So it’s either: Yes, move ninth grade to the high school campus, and fully renovate — we’ve been using the term ‘reimagine’ — what is happening there at the high school, and right-sizing it for 4,000 students, as opposed to 2,400 as it was built in the 1970s. Or No: refurbish the existing building, and do a systems renovation only, and keep our grade alignment the way it is,” he said.

Throughout the year, district staff and the school board have made the case for renovations to modernize and possibly expand the school and upgrade and repair utilities that in places date back to the original school’s construction in the early 1970s.

Public presentations, all posted on the district’s ‘Reimagine NPHS’ website, have shown traffic upgrades needed around the school campus in January, recent equipment failures inside the school in February, cost estimates in March for the construction, and summer brought bids on, then a contract for, a construction management firm to oversee the work.

In an invite-only meeting in July, students and community members tested various site layouts, with August bringing talks on the timeline for a voter referendum needed to approve \$97 million in borrowing for the expansion, and in September the board and architect unveiled renderings of what the new school could look like, followed in October by a board vote to set a Jan. 16, 2024, date for a voter referendum.

Ahead of Thursday night’s school board meeting, the district announced a community forum discussion at the high school, 1340 Valley Forge Road in Towamencin, to be held on Dec. 5. The event will begin with tours of the high school starting at 5:30 p.m. and leaving every 15 minutes until 6:15 p.m., showing the public the various needs and issues throughout the building, followed by a forum at 7 p.m.



Former North Penn High School Principal Pete Nicholson, now a district administrator for secondary education and renovations, shows residents aging infrastructure and equipment that could be replaced during potential NPHS renovations. (Photo courtesy of NPSD)

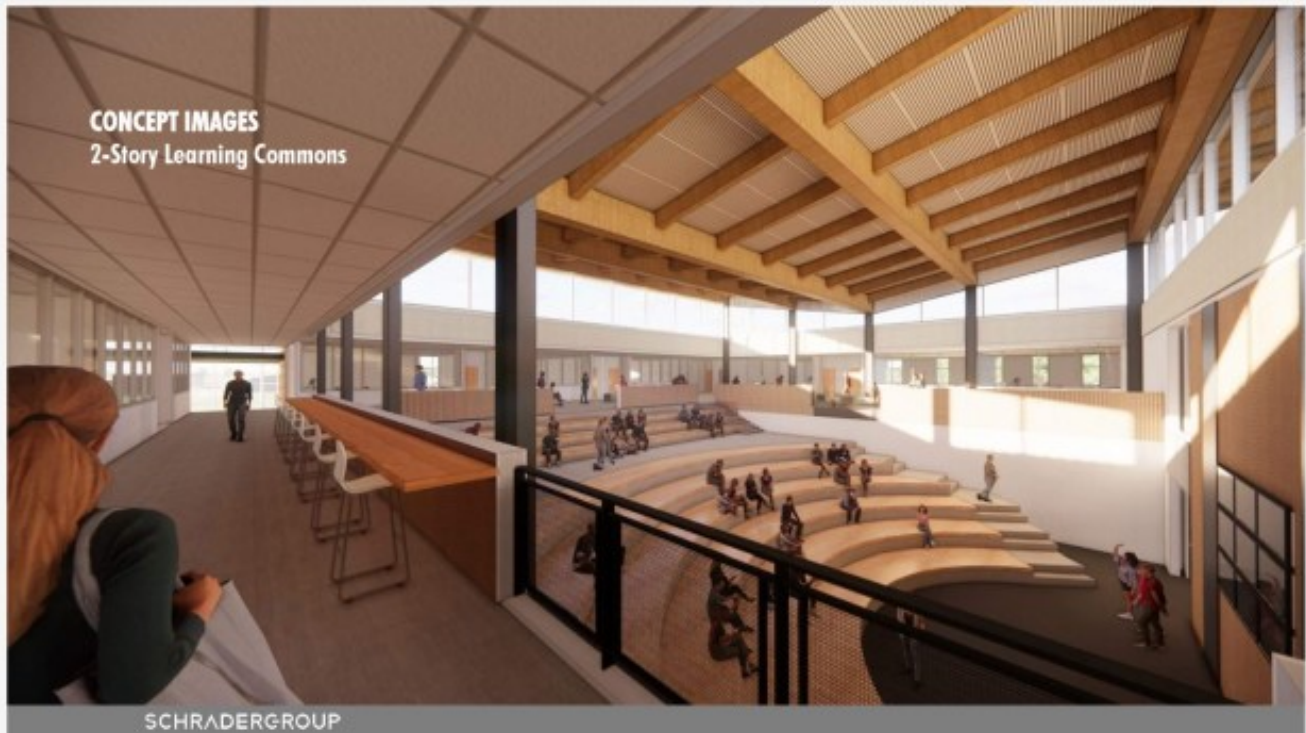
The forum will include a presentation from, and Q-and-A with, administrators on the renovations needed to the high school, and about the question at issue during the Jan. 16 referendum. The forum will be streamed live on NPTV via Comcast channel 28, Verizon FIOS channel 29, YouTube, Facebook, and on the radio at WNPV 98.5 FM. NPTV is also available for streaming on the FireTV, Apple TV, and ROKU apps by searching “North Penn Television,” according to the district.

During the school board’s Oct. 30 facilities and operations committee meeting, the district director of Facilities and Operations gave an update on the ongoing discussions between staff and the district’s architect and construction manager about the high school renovations. District Administrator of Secondary Education and Renovations Pete Nicholson continues to offer public tours of the school, for which he was principal from 2018 to 2022, with upcoming tours scheduled for 6 p.m. on Nov. 28, Dec. 12, and Jan. 9 ahead of the Jan. 16 referendum date.

“We have had more folks every time we’ve provided a tour; each Tuesday, we’ve had more people come out. I hope that continues,” Nicholson said, adding that a mid-October tour drew roughly 30 members of the public.

Bauer added discussion during the Oct. 30 meeting on several items raised in recent board meetings and campaign literature, including the latest design, bidding and construction timelines.

“Bidding the project occurs after we have fully completed the design process. We are estimating right now, we’re talking spring of ’25 when the project would actually be bid,” he said.



Rendering of proposed renovations to North Penn High School, with group instruction spaces adjacent to new classrooms. (Image courtesy of Schrader Group Architects)

Staff and the architect have put “hundreds of hours” into designing plans ahead of the referendum, Bauer told the committee, and developing rough cost estimates: roughly \$403 million for the yes option, including adding ninth grade to the high school, versus a \$236 million estimated price tag for the no-vote option. The referendum question itself will ask the public to approve \$97 million in borrowing, Bauer told the committee, yet the difference in cost estimates is greater than that number, for several reasons.

“The reason for that is, that \$403 (million) versus \$236 (million) is future borrowing capacity. If ‘Yes’ does not prevail on January 16th, by one vote, well then we need to renovate and upgrade all three middle schools, and keep our grading structure the way it currently is,” with ninth grade kept at the middle schools, Bauer said.

“We certainly want air conditioning, and to remove modular construction, and right-size those buildings for the appropriate number of students. Given the future projects, we don’t believe that we can move forward with, say, \$403 (million) minus \$97 (million) because we will still have three major building projects on the docket, ready to go. In voting ‘Yes,’ we do believe that some of the pressure of facility needs would be relieved as a result of moving ninth grade out of our middle schools,” he said.



Plastic pieces meant to represent various classrooms and facilities at North Penn High School were studied and placed by various resident groups during a workshop meeting on July 17, 2023. (Photo courtesy of NPSD)

Anyone with questions on the high school or future middle school projects can attend the high school tours, school board or committee meetings, the Dec. 5 forum, or submit a form available on the [district's 'Reimagine NPHS' website](#), rather than rely on social media rumors, the superintendent added.

“We are on the precipice of charting a course for the school district for the next 50 years, and I want everyone to be informed and have every single one of their questions answered,” he said.

Board President Tina Stoll asked about comparisons between the [recently completed renovations at Knapp Elementary](#), where a new wing of the school was built and the rest of the school ten renovated, and if the high school renovations would follow a similar approach.

“If ‘Yes’ is the majority on January 16th, then the addition is two wings, that are three stories, and that would be the first building construction to occur, so we can utilize that space as swing space,” Bauer said.

“At Knapp we added just a couple of classrooms; this would be adding a substantial amount of space to the building itself. And we would utilize that throughout the construction. That is not to say it wouldn’t be disruptive,” he said, and staff are planning how to minimize those

disruptions for the rest of the students.

Board member Jonathan Kassa asked for clarification on the costs of adding air conditioning to the three middle schools and said the roughly \$40 million cost estimate presented publicly in 2021 had increased significantly. Bauer and Schneider answered that while no formal plans for doing so have been developed, the architect has used square footage estimates to come up with current cost for just air conditioning at roughly “\$57 million and some change — that’s for the cost of the air conditioning, and there are a lot of other infrastructure improvements, electric systems and electrical services to the buildings would have to be upgraded when you put that much additional load on a building,” Schneider said.

“People have said, ‘Why don’t you do it now, for the future renovations?’ Well, a chiller does not run efficiently if it’s over-sized. You’re going to spend a lot of money, for a lot more capacity, than if you were just to size it properly. It’s not like a residential house, that you can just put a window air conditioner in,” he said.

North Penn’s school board next meets at 6:30 p.m. on Dec. 4, with the facilities and operations committee next meeting at 7 p.m. on Nov. 27 online; for more information visit www.NPenn.org.