

Vision unveiled for Bryan Arts and Education Center building

- By Brian Koeller bkoeller@bryantimes.com
- Nov 19, 2024 Updated Dec 9, 2024



Above is the front of the Bryan Arts and Education Center. Local officials have a plan to give the front a new look, demolish the south portion and rebuild it with an eye toward enhancements going on elsewhere in Bryan's downtown.

Bryan City Schools has plans for the former school building on West High Street, and will be working with the community to try to make it become a reality.

"We're excited to start to unveil that we have a vision for the central building," Bryan City Schools Superintendent Mark Rairigh told the board.

He added school officials were at a crossroads of the future of the building, which is currently the host of Bryan Arts and Education Center in the front portion of the structure. He added the building has an auditorium, gymnasium and classrooms. Parts of it were built in 1917 and 1938.

“Those dates alone tell you the age of the building,” Rairigh said.

He also said there have been numerous discussions on plans and proposals.

“The decision was made that with the enhancements and rejuvenation process that is happening in the downtown square and beyond that, the performing arts and having the auditorium be an event center that can continue to enhance the downtown area is what’s best for the community,” Rairigh said.

He also said the building is a community building already, used by many different organizations.

“So we made a decision that that building is going to stay put and is going to host the performing arts,” Rairigh said.

There will be changes, however, including demolition of the south portion of the building which is the classrooms and gymnasium.

“We have to look at it (the building) in two sections,” Rairigh said. “Section one is the auditorium side, which we’re going to aim to maintain and rejuvenate.”

The Williams County Land Reutilization Corp. (land bank) has been awarded \$1 million in a state brownfield grant and the school has applied for a portion of these funds for the demolition of the south part of the building. It will be applying for a permit for demolition, which is due by Dec. 5.

“That will encompass taking down the classroom section and the gymnasium section of that building only, so that we can leave the performing arts section, which involves the auditorium and stage, and use that section for rejuvenation and enhancement,” Rairigh said.

Future plans

The demolition of the south portion of the building will be just the start, according to current proposed plans.

“We need to make some decisions on how we’re going to rejuvenate and enhance the building,” Rairigh said.

He said the first phase, the brownfield remediation, will take about 18 months, including the demolition. After that will come the rejuvenation and enhancement.

“We have two aspects that we’re looking at,” Rairigh said. “We want to address the performing arts side, we have lighting and sound discussions already underway, but we need rehearsal space, we need dressing room space, we need storage space and set building space.”

He also said the building should be a place that can host “great events,” such as the school’s plays and musical productions, as well as events held by other organizations.

Plans call for an extension of the front to create a new entrance and lobby.

“We want to have that downtown presence that aligns with the city’s mission of continued enhancement,” Rairigh said.

Restrooms would also be made compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The proposal also calls for rebuilding on the portion that has been torn down.

“That rebuild would involve encompassing all of those backstage needs,” Rairigh said. He added there would also be a basement which could be used for storage.

Costs

Bryan City Schools would be responsible for a 25% match on the brownfield grant and Rairigh said estimated demolition costs are between \$400,000 and \$500,000. He estimates the school portion of demolition to be about \$100,000.

The new north lobby addition is being estimated at \$1.4 million and rebuilding the south side would be estimated at \$2.7 million.

“All in all, we’re looking at a total cost for a project of this nature to be around \$4.2 million,” Rairigh said.

He added he has reviewed the district’s finances with Treasurer Kevin Schafer.

“We are comfortable from the school side of things to say we can make this happen,” Rairigh said.

However, he stressed it will take a partnership with the community.

The district plans to spend \$2.1 million toward the project total, and created a fund for such purposes at its board meeting Monday, with expectations the community will provide the other \$2.1 million.

“Through a series of community committee meetings and community input we are very happy to pursue this vision for the central building and the arts that is desired by so many community stakeholders,” Rairigh said. “Their passion to continue to see Bryan thrive is unmatched.”

To that end, the district has already worked with the Bryan Area Foundation to establish a fund for the project. Creating that fund required an “establishing gift” and Rairigh said Dr. George and Julie Brown donated \$100,000 toward that end.

The project will be called ART Connects Us, and Russ Davies will be spearheading the campaign.

Rairigh said the construction phase likely would not begin until late next year or into 2026, and there probably will be periods during the construction that access to the site will be limited.

“So we’re going to have to sort through that, but we’ve got a little bit of time,” Rairigh said.

“If we don’t do something, we’re just going to keep throwing money at it,” Bryan City Schools Board of Education Member Lynn Wieland said.

Schafer pointed out the roof over the south portion is nearing the time it will need replaced anyway, and he estimated that cost could be \$400,000 to \$500,000.

Future plans for the Bryan Arts and Education Center include the following: A new north addition to help accommodate the following: •Lobby space •Restroom facilities •Fellowship space A continued downtown presence aligned with the city’s mission of continued growth and development. A new south addition to help accommodate the following: •Rehearsal space

•Dressing rooms •Backstage restrooms •Set building space •Storage space Auditorium upgrades to help accommodate the following: •Lighting systems •Sound systems •Interior designs/seating (*Information courtesy of Bryan City Schools.*)