

HENDERSON INDEPENDENT

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Henderson residents turned out to an Open House for the new County Road 6 project last Wednesday.

Nature marvels

Flowering cactus offers a mystery while a fish that looks like it was from the depths of the ocean shows up.
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Farewell to Larry

Minnesota lost a history buff, and Henderson a longtime friend with the passing of Larry Granger. P. 9

Hilltop gets final referendum reprieve

Passions run high as board goes with 2-building option

By Rachel Miller
Editor

One vote. Like sinking a three-pointer to win by 1 at the buzzer, Henderson's Hilltop Elementary School was saved — at least for now — by one single vote, in what wound up being a respectful but highly contentious Le Sueur-Henderson School Board meeting.

Monday night's meeting was held in the Park Elementary School gymnasium, and the main item on the agenda was to decide the fate of a referendum, and when it should be held. It was also new Superintendent Jim Wagner's first board meeting, and his first recommendation to the board was to support maintain-



PHOTO BY RACHEL MILLER

Monday night's school board meeting was respectful, but at times emotional and contentious as board members struggled and debated on making a building referendum decision. After two failed motions, the board ultimately voted 4-1 to move forward with a Nov. 2 ballot question, asking residents whether they would support spending just under \$51 million to renovate Hilltop for grades 4-5, and demolish Park and build a new PreK-3 building onto the Middle/High School site in Le Sueur.

SCHOOL REFERENDUM
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Dozens turn out for CR-6 Open House

By Rachel Miller
Editor

Sibley County held an open house in Henderson on Wednesday, July 14 to inform residents about the County Road 6 road construction plans coming up that will lift the road out of the 50-year flood plain.

A portion of the road will be raised six to eight feet, which will allow the road to remain open during high rain events. Sibley County Public Works Director Tim Becker stated they want to use clay-type material to fill in the road, as that will help prevent erosion.

Right now the county is on a fast

COUNTY ROAD 6
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Local residents look over the County Road 6 project map last Wednesday. PHOTO BY RACHEL MILLER

Indy gets new press date

Starting in August, the Independent will be moving to print on Wednesdays, and a broadsheet size.
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COVID-19 Update

New cases topped 1,000 for the first time in five weeks.
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Giant blight debate

A motion to help remove the former Green Giant concrete pad that is a public eyesore failed due to lack of a second.
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Rookie drivers upset

Some new faces graced victory lane at Arlington Raceway on Saturday.
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State enters drought phase

More than half the state is in severe drought, and 4 percent is in extreme drought.
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SCHOOL REFERENDUM
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ing Hilltop Elementary School for grades 4-5, and demolishing Park Elementary School and building a new PreK-3 school at the Middle/High School site. That option would cost around \$50.7 million — \$2 million more than building a PreK-12 building in Le Sueur — but would maintain a presence in both communities.

Furthermore, Wagner stated that Hilltop was in great shape, would be easy to refurbish, and he also believes this option is the best one to grow the district and get back some of the 200 students currently open-enrolled elsewhere.

“I am a ‘Field of Dreams’ guy — if you build it, they will come,” Wagner said.

But not everyone was on board with Wagner’s dream, or rather, some board members felt the best option would be a K-12 school that would be \$2 million cheaper and save the district \$313,000/year, as opposed to the \$51,000/year savings by operating two buildings.

After a motion to hold a November election (no building option specified) failed 3-2, board member Joe Roby turned down Wagner’s recommendation and made a motion to hold a February 2022 election and ask voters to consider a K-12 school in Le Sueur. Board member Matt Hathaway seconded Roby’s motion.

Roby shared that he feels both Le Sueur and Henderson have grown together in the 30 years since the district joined forces, and he felt one building was in the best interest of the students.

“It is not Henderson vs. Le Sueur kids, it is all of our kids versus the world,” Roby said. “This option puts us and our children in the best position to have success over the next 30-40 years.”

Board member Gretchen Rehm, who lives in Henderson, fought back tears at times as she wrestled with the decision. Although she did believe that one school would be best for the kids and the taxpayers, she acknowledged she was not prepared to go down that road unless every other option was exhausted.

In the end, Rehm and fellow Henderson board member Brian Sorenson voted against the one-building option, while Roby and Board Chair Brigid Tuck supported it.

It all came down to Hathaway, who despite seconding Roby’s motion for a vote, changed his mind and joined Rehm and Sorenson to vote against a PreK-12 school.

Despite also previously voting against a November election, Hathaway turned around and made a motion to put forth a two-building referendum question this November. His motion passed 4-1, with Roby offering the lone dissenting vote. The board also clarified they want to include a secondary question to ask the



INDEPENDENT FILE PHOTO/RACHEL MILLER

Students head home after a day of school at Henderson’s Hilltop Elementary School. Come Nov. 2, LS-H residents will be asked to decide whether they want to support a building referendum that retains Hilltop in Henderson.

community whether they would support spending \$7.1 million to build an attached steel frame, fabric fieldhouse at the Middle/High School site.

Should a November referendum fail, there is enough time for the school board to regroup and try another referendum for an election in February 2022.

DISTRICT DONATIONS

Prior to the referendum debate, the school board approved \$51,292.90 in donations, which included:

- Families First of Minnesota donated \$37,500 for Pathways Scholarships for Little Giants tuition assistance;
- Holly Vinkemeier/Crystal’s Gift donated \$4,331 for the middle/high school special education program;
- Covia-Unimin donated \$3,500 for 2021 Scholarships;
- Vinkemeier/Crystal’s Gift donated \$1,775 for Park Elementary’s special education program;
- LS-H Softball Association donated \$1,500 for the baseball program;
- P.T.O. donated \$995 for Generation Genius one-year subscription;
- Vinkemeier/Crystal’s Gift donated \$995 for Hilltop Elementary’s special education program
- United Fund of Le Sueur donated \$500 for Kids Club Adventure Days
- Le Sueur Lions donated \$150 for Community Education Book Buddies program;
- An anonymous Wells Far-

Building referendum

** Editor’s Note: The phrasing below was drafted based on the outcome of Monday’s meeting by Independent staff, and the actual wording on the November election will be phrased differently.*

On Tuesday, Nov. 2, Le Sueur-Henderson School District residents age 18+ will be asked to vote on the following referendum:

Do you support closing Park Elementary School, building a new PreK-3 school onto the Middle/High School site, and refurbishing Hilltop Elementary School for grades 4-5? The project is estimated to cost \$50,725,000.

This includes \$38,725,000

for the elementary school projects, including \$26.5 million to build a new PreK-3 building at the high school, \$1.8 million to demolish Park, and \$10,425,000 to renovate, fix deferred maintenance, and build an addition at Hilltop Elementary School. It also includes \$8.5 million on deferred maintenance at the high school, and \$3.5 million to renovate and add on to the Career Technical Education wing at the high school.

Voters will also be asked a secondary question: Do you support building a \$7.1 million, 51,000-square-foot fieldhouse?

The secondary question can pass or fail on its own, but would fail if the primary referendum question fails.

go patron donated \$25 for high school activities;

• General Mills donated \$21.90 Box Tops collection payout for Park Elementary activities;

SCHOLASTIC LITERACY

The district also received an extremely generous donation, from a donor who wished to remain anonymous, to purchase new Scholastic Literacy curriculum, which will cost \$125,347.13.

PERSONNEL CHANGES

After serving as an assistant coach with the boys Bulldogs

hockey team for the past three season, Chris Miller was hired as the new boys hockey head coach, replacing Shea Roehrkaase.

Mitch Goecke and Jeff Kotek will be joining the Bulldogs boys hockey team as assistant coaches.

Brad O’Keefe may just go down in history as the person with the shortest coaching tenure at Le Sueur-Henderson. O’Keefe was also slated to be a new first year assistant coach for the boys team, and the board approved his hiring on Monday night.

However, as part of the same consent agenda, the board also approved his resignation. In his resignation paperwork, dated July 15 — just 15 days after his hiring paperwork was received — O’Keefe wrote that he was turning down the position.

“After a few conversations with Chris (Miller) regarding how the coaching staff would be structured and who would fill what roles, I have decided not to accept the position,” O’Keefe wrote. “I was very excited about the opportunity to be an assistant coach at the varsity level and that is the position that I thought I applied for and interviewed for. Chris has let me know that my position could be that of being a JV coach and thus I am going to decline the position.”

The board also approved a resignation from volleyball C squad coach Monroe Julius, who has served in that capacity for the past three years.

The board also approved hiring Caitlin Naylor as a K-5 ESL teacher, and Mikhayla Clausen as the new One-Act Play director.

Clausen will be replacing outgoing One-Act Play Director Emily Barnard, whose resignation was also approved on Monday night.

Barnard has been the One-Act Play director for the past two years, but will be moving across the country to attend Oregon State University starting this fall.

“I want to thank you and the rest of the LS-H staff for allowing me the opportunity to advise the most amazing group of kids, in tennis, theatre, and speech,” Barnard wrote in her resignation letter to Activities Director Jeff Christ. “Thank you for being a continued advocate for the arts and for encouraging the entire student body in everything they do.”

ATHLETICS AND ACTIVITIES FEES

The board held the line on fees for the district’s athletics and activities, maintaining the same fee level as last year. The fee schedule is as follows:

• **Middle school:** \$60 to be in the spring play; knowledge bowl and speech; \$70 to participate in cross country, volleyball, girls tennis, baseball, softball, boys/girls track, and boys/girls golf; \$80 for wrestling, boys basketball and girls basketball; and \$90 for football.

• **High school:** \$30 for intramurals; \$60 to be in one-act play; \$70 to be in the fall play, knowledge bowl and speech; \$100 to be in adaptive floor hockey and adaptive bowling; \$110 to be in cross country, volleyball, girls tennis, baseball, softball, boys/girls track and boys/girls golf; \$120 to be in girls swimming/diving, wrestling, boys basketball, girls basketball, and girls dance; \$140 to be in football; and \$260 to be in boys hockey and girls hockey.

There is a family maximum of \$500 for athletics and activities.