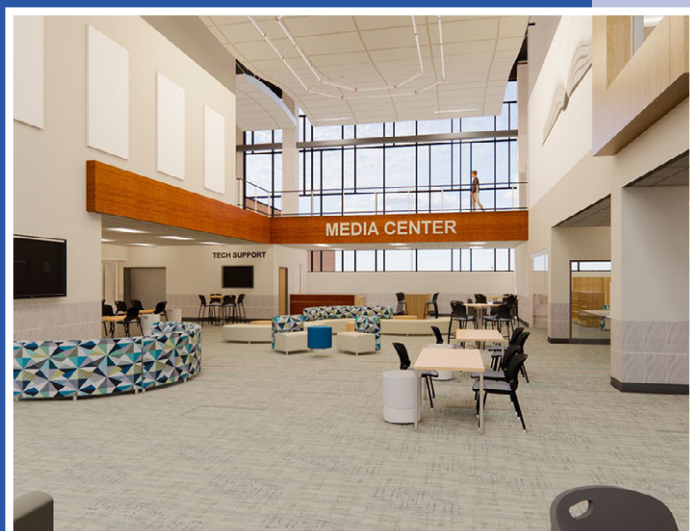
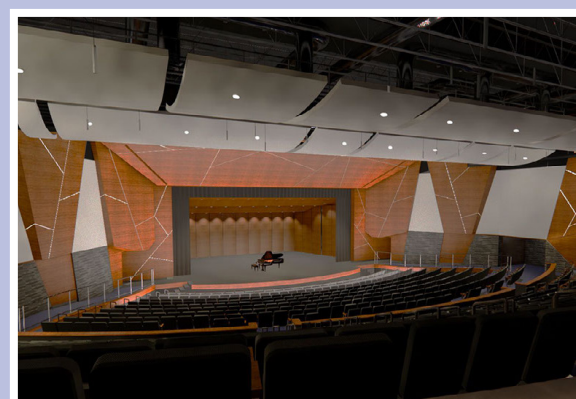




Welcome to the new OWATONNA HIGH SCHOOL



Souvenir Section Produced by the Steele County Times
August 2023



Students weigh in on being part of the process

Will Halverson was just a seventh-grader when he stood in the middle of a huge, empty lot on 18th Street Southeast in Owatonna.

He was one of six students chosen to take part in the ceremonial groundbreaking of what would, two years later, be the building where he would start his sophomore year of high school.

The Steele County Times contacted some of those students as the project neared completion and asked them about several aspects of the experience.

Christian Flores

(member of the Core Planning Team)

1. What grade will you be in this fall?

I am going to be a sophomore.

2. What did you learn from being on the planning committee?

What I learned was that everyone's opinion matters and (can) have a big input on the topic of conversation.

3. Did any part of the process surprise you?

What surprised me was everyone's ideas and opinions about what would make the high school function better.

4. What do you think when you hear people complain about

the new school?

When I hear people complain about it, I just say to them that they need to give this new high school a chance, and that it needed to be done.

5. What are you most looking forward to at the new building?

What I look forward to the most is probably the new football field and weight room ... and that there's air conditioning.

6. Do you think being a part of this will affect what you do in the future? Do you think you'll be more involved in the community in which you live?

Continued on page 3



SUBMITTED PHOTO

In this photo from May 6, 2021, six students who would be attending the new OHS participated in the shovel ceremony during the official groundbreaking. From left are Davaeh Williams, Will Halverson, Christian Flores, Istahil Hassan, Donte Miller and Kate Sande.

OHS TIMELINE

January-May 2015 Community Task Force on Facilities is convened to study the school district's facility needs and develop a Facilities Master Plan	The task force identifies elementary crowding, deferred maintenance, and school security as pressing needs and notes the aging high school also needs to	be addressed in the near future	additions passes with 57.24% of the vote	Facilities Master Plan The task force recommends building a new high school	to build a new high school with 49.45% voting yes
		November 2015 Bond referendum for deferred maintenance, safety and security, and school building	August-December 2018 A new Community Task Force on Facilities convenes to update	May 2019 Voters defeat funding request of \$116M	May-November 2019 The school district listens to the community and makes

Continued from page 2

I will be a 10th-grader in the fall.

2. What did you learn from being on the subcommittee?

I learned a lot from being on the committees, one of which being that there are a lot of super little details that go into every single piece of designing the new high school. Those details (could be) budget issues or the colors on the basketball court.

3. Did any part of the process surprise you?

Some of the planning that surprised me were the amount of steps involved, from just getting the basic layout of the building, to traveling around and seeing what works well at other schools to then implementing it into our plan.

4. What do you think when you hear people complain about the new school?

I think that people are never going to like change but that's part of the process. I truly believe that they've known the current high school and have grown up with it. I think that once they experience the new high school they will truly ap-



preciate how wonderful it will be.

5. What are you most looking forward to at the new building?

The few things I'm most looking forward to are the air conditioning, along with the new sports

facilities. The facilities will be top of the line and I can't wait to play football on the new turf field.

6. Do you think being a part of this will affect what you do in the future? Do you think you'll be more involved in

the community in which you live?

I do think that being involved in this will affect me. One way it will affect me is when I look around at the new high school I can look at it and appreciate all the hard

work and effort that has gone into it. It will also affect me because if I ever would want to go into a job doing something along the lines of architecture or something related I now know some of the hard work that

goes into all of this.

7. Have any of your thoughts/ideas changed from how you felt about the school in the beginning?

In the beginning, I was unsure on how I felt with the building but I knew I was excited. Now knowing a lot of the details that are going to be in the building I can't wait to be there. The open concept and the state of the art facilities will be incredible, and I can't wait to experience it next school year!

Istahil Hassan
(member of the Core Planning Team)

1. What grade will you be in this fall?

11th

2. What did you learn from being on the planning committee?

Even with so many people working on the same project, it takes a lot of time and effort.

3. Did any part of the process surprise you?

All of it, to be honest, and I still can't believe it!

4. What do you think when you hear people complain about the new school?

I can't expect everyone

Continued on page 4

the following changes:

- Reduced the cost (\$116M to \$104M) and tax impact (\$23/month to \$16.17/month) for the new high school
- Added a second ballot question that would provide \$8M to renovate and repurpose

the existing high school for district and/or community use

- Had two companies provide estimates to renovate existing high school; the renovation costs were so close to building new that they were deemed not fiscally

responsible.

- Developed a conceptual site plan as well as examples of what learning spaces could look like

November 2019

- Voters approve ballot requests of \$104M to build a new high

school (55.67% yes) and \$8M to repurpose current Owatonna High School site (50.77% yes)

December 2019-March 2020

- New High School Core Planning Team (students, staff, and com-

munity members) meets to help set philosophy, function, and look/feel for new high school

April-June 2020

- Design development for new high school
- Construction bids open and are award-

ed

May 6, 2021

- Groundbreaking ceremony is held

June 2021

- Construction begins

September 2023

- School begins in new high school

Continued from page 3

to like it, but I hope they grow used to it and eventually see how great it is.

5. What are you most looking forward to at the new building?

The feeling of being in a brand new environment.

6. Do you think being a part of this will affect what you do in the future? Do you think you'll be more involved in the community in which you live?

After experiencing the planning process and seeing all the cool and interesting stuff, I will definitely be more involved in the community to be able to experience more opportunities like this.

7. Have any of your thoughts/ideas changed from how you felt about the school in the beginning?

In the beginning, I was kind of unsure about

how the whole process would go, but now I'm very optimistic about the new school.

Donte Miller

1. What grade will you be in this fall?

I will enter the new high school as a senior.

2. Did any part of the process surprise you?

Honestly, the part that surprised me the most is how fast the new building is being built.

3. What do you think when you hear people complain about the new school?

Whenever I hear someone complain about the new building, I remind them that we will have a bigger (hopefully air-conditioned) gym, better fields to practice sports, hopefully bigger classes with air conditioning as well, and better parking.

4. What are you most looking forward to at the new building?

The one thing that I am really looking forward to is the build itself.

5. Do you think being a part of this will affect what you do in the future? Do you think you'll be more involved in the community in which you live?

With this new school, I don't really know if this will make me more involved in the community. That would be the hope, but I don't know right now.

Kate Sande

1. What grade will you be in in the fall?

I will be a senior this fall at Owatonna High School.

2. Did any part of the process surprise you?

I was surprised at how much the Student Council does for homecoming in the community. Growing up, I never would have guessed that a group of high school students would order

everything for the floats, find the convertibles and the drivers, and make a whole parade happen. It has helped me appreciate events that happen because I understand how many little pieces went into making them happen.

3. What do you think when you hear people complain about the new school?

I don't often hear people complain about having a new school; usually I hear people being excited about it. The only common "complaint" I've heard is how it will be weird to not know where anything is as a senior and feeling like a freshman again in a new building. I am sure any of these feelings will disappear very quickly as soon as the school year starts though.

4. What are you most looking forward to at the new building?

I am looking forward

to all of the new traditions that I will be able to help create in the new legacy of the building as the first graduating class. I am looking forward to having air conditioning in the fall and spring and not having to eat lunch on the floor of senior commons next year. I am most looking forward to all of the memories that will be made in this new building.

5. Do you think being a part of this will affect what you do in the future? Do you think you'll be more involved in the community in which you live?

I think that this will affect how involved the community is due to all of the opportunities for new traditions. As the vice president of next year's student council, we have already had meetings over the summer to start planning homecoming and

things like the back to school pep fest and back to school dance, and so many ideas come flooding in as to how we can make this year so special and start exciting new traditions for years to come. I don't think we would have nearly as many ideas or as much excitement as we do if it wasn't for the new building we will attend this fall.

6. Have any of your thoughts/ideas changed from how you felt about the school in the beginning?

I've made a lot of good memories at the high school, and I've spent countless hours in that building before, during and after school, so parts of me were a little sad to know that shortly, that space won't exist, but overall, I have always been very excited for the new building and I know that it's time for a fresh start.



Owatonna Proud

JEFF ELSTAD

"Thank you" seems inadequate to express our deep appre-

ciation to the Owatonna community for all the support our students have received since the bond referendum passed in November 2019.

Owatonna has a long history of providing an excellent education to our younger generation. We are grateful to all who voted yes, who were ready to invest in this new era of education as we continue

to prepare students to be 21st century learners.

We also thank our corporate donors who provided cash or in-kind donations that significantly reduced the impact on our taxpayers and showed their dedication to equipping our students to be ready to enter the workforce or move on to higher education: Federated Insurance, Gopher

Sport, The Rypka Family, Life Fitness/Cybox, Mayo Clinic Health System, Viracon, Wenger Corporation, Wenger Foundation, ISD 761 Foundation, and Owatonna Foundation.

Many community members joined our staff and students to provide input in the planning process to create a building that meets the educational needs of students and is a

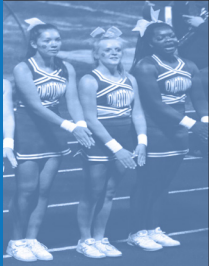
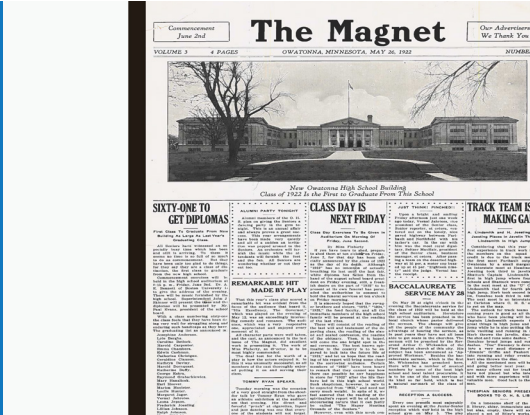
beautiful gathering space for our entire community. We are grateful for their time and commitment.

We are so grateful for the incredible generosity of our community that made the new high school possible. This innovative building will be a safe and inspiring learning environment for all students as they continue to focus their

studies through our Career Pathways programming. The new Owatonna High School is designed to meet the needs of our students in an evolving global economy well into the future.

Strong schools truly do make strong communities!

Jeff Elstad is superintendent of Owatonna Public Schools.



Pillar 1 is located at the North Elevator

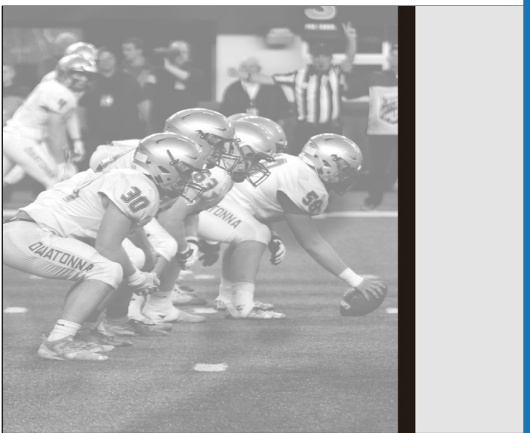
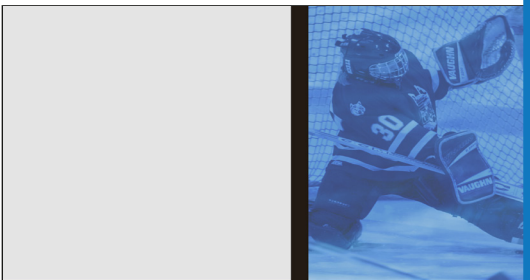
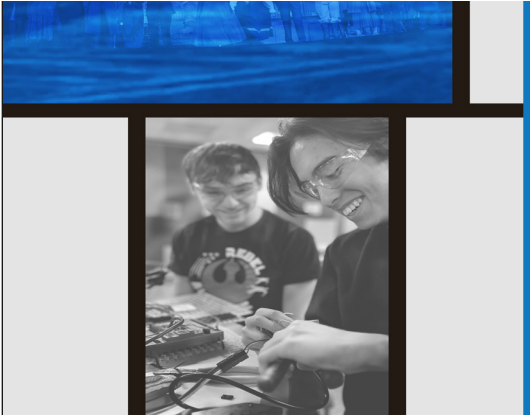
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STAMP OF APPROVAL



Olson puts mark on facilities

BY KAY FATE STAFF WRITER

Spend about 30 minutes inside the new Owatonna High School these days, and you'll hear, "Hey, Bob!" about 30 times.

Bob Olson has been the face of the massive construction project on the southeast edge of town, and it would appear nearly every one of the hundreds of people who worked on the site knew it.

"It's been fun," he said late last month. "I love it. Every day I come to the school, there's something different."

In that sense, it's a lot like education itself, said Olson, who spent six years as an elementary school teacher and 18 years as a principal for Owatonna Public Schools. He's been the district's director of facilities, infrastructure, and security for nearly nine years.

Building a new high school, though, has been an ongoing discussion in the district "even when we added on (to the existing high school) in 1997," he said.

The impetus for this project came in 2018 with a recommendation from a

community task force on facilities.

The first bond vote, which asked for \$116 million in May 2019, failed by less than 1%.

The second vote, in November 2019 – asking for \$104 million for a new high school and \$8 million to repurpose the existing school – passed by about 5%.

As with any project that affects taxpayers, Olson has taken his share of criticism. In 2019, the district said the referendum would add about .01% of a home's value monthly to homeowners' taxes.

The negative feedback about the decision to build is part of the growing pains, he said.

"I hate to say it, but you get used to it," Olson said. "I don't let it bother me, because I know we're doing the right thing. When it's all said and done, the kids – and the community – will have a state-of-the-art school, and when the kids come in here, they'll know how nice it is."

Now that the work is almost done?

"We're not done," Olson corrected. "We still have

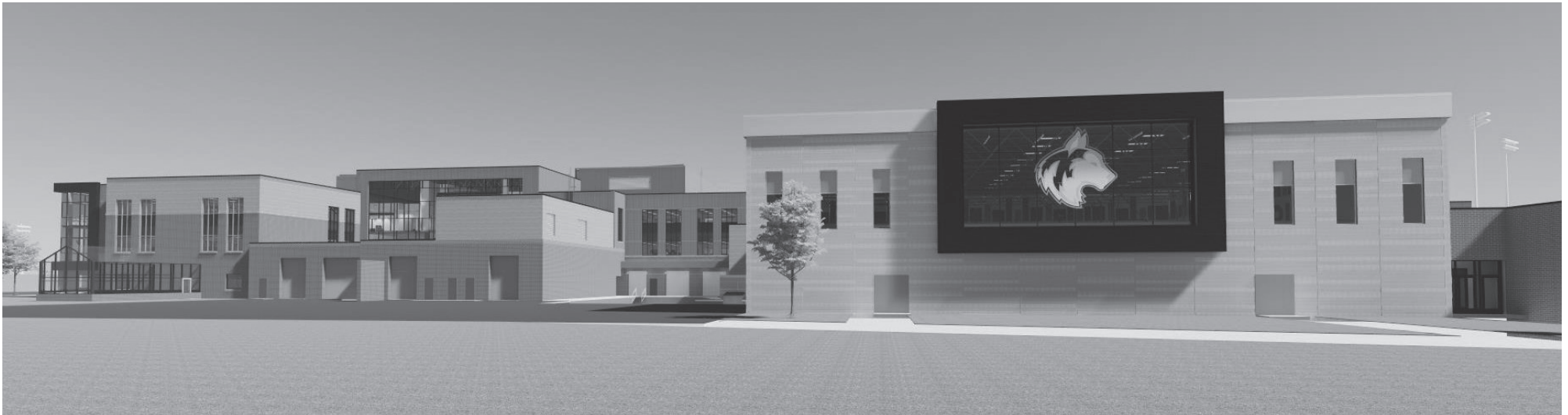
Continued on page 18



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

Bob Olson, director of facilities, infrastructure, and security, points to second-floor classrooms during a construction tour of the new Owatonna High School back in November. Olson has been the face of the \$126 million project that is scheduled to be completed next month.





Owatonna facilities ready for what's to come

BY KAY FATE STAFF WRITER

In his nearly decade-long tenure as director of facilities, infrastructure, and security for Owatonna Public Schools, Bob Olson has overseen seemingly non-stop projects.

That's thanks to the formation of a task force and a facility study done in 2014.

"There were a lot of needs in every building,"

Olson said, leading to many conversations with construction companies and engineers.

That included needing a new high school, "but our thoughts were if we built a high school first, we may never pass another bond to get those other ones updated," he said. "I think it was pretty smart to go forward and do those first, to show we could do some good things and build some good things."

The \$77.8 million bond approved by voters in 2015 was the first referendum passed in the district since 1996.

Half of the money went toward additions to Lincoln Elementary and McKinley (now Washington) Elementary schools, as well as expansions at Willow Creek Intermediate (now McKinley Elementary) and the middle school – to move the sixth graders into the building.

The other half was spent on maintenance improvements at all schools, office renovations, and security updates – including controlled entrances and more surveillance cameras. In addition, the schools received upgrades to their HVAC mechanical systems and parking lots.

"When this school and the (existing OHS) are done, this district should be good to go, facility-wise, with the guts and stuff," Olson said late last month

during a tour of the new high school.

OHS Principal Kory Kath agreed.

"All of the elementary schools and middle school have had enhancements to them that have impacted kids," he said.

"Now a brand-new high school – there are people that are going to pause and say, 'this is absolutely a community that cares about its kids and their learning.'"

Olson misses spending his days with students, he admitted. He taught fifth- and sixth-graders, then served as an elementary school principal for 18 years before taking his current role.

If he had to do it all over again, would he focus on construction instead of instruction?

"Nope," he said. "I'm an educator – I just happen to be doing something different at the end of my career."



NEW OHS BY THE NUMBERS:

- \$104 Million cost to taxpayers
- \$22 million donations from businesses
- 2021 construction began
- 3 Stories
- 317,000 square feet
- 1,600 student capacity
- 825 seat auditorium
- 90-acre site
- 890 parking spots
- 5-station field house with walking track



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Owatonna Middle School was renovated and expanded in 2016-17, thanks to a \$77.8 million referendum that passed in 2015. The current McKinley Elementary School was also expanded, and significant improvements were made to Lincoln, Washington, and Wilson elementary schools.

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"With over 50 years serving the community, this project was very meaningful. Thank you Owatonna Public School District and R & K team members for shaping the future of our children and grandchildren for generations to come." ~Eric and Lisa Kylo



Residential Commercial Agricultural Industrial

Design elements bring OHS closer to home

BY KAY FATE STAFF WRITER

It's a brand new school, but it may feel ... a little familiar.

That's the hope, anyway, as students and community members come through the doors of the new Owatonna High School.

"People in the focus groups talked about our downtown," said Kory Kath, OHS principal. "They're proud of the parks and woods, and the fact that the central focus within our community is the Straight River.

"All those things have a presence in the building, and you'll see it."

It begins at the front door, with the terrazzo floor of the commons.

"The Straight River

truly is flowing through the middle of the school, just like it does in our community," Kath said. "They brought in blue terrazzo; it's just gorgeous the way it's designed."

For visitors who are unaware of its importance, "we might put a little plaque up, explaining what it is," said Bob Olson, director of facilities, infrastructure, and security for the district.

The other main idea – downtown Owatonna – is also visibly represented in the commons.

"All these 'boxes' that come out? Those are our storefronts; that's our downtown," Kath said of the large classroom windows of various shapes and sizes that face the commons.

"Downtown is a place for gathering, a place for seeing people, a place for people to connect," he said. "Well, that's where students can be seen in the classrooms, to reflect the concept of 'learning on display.'"

The result, Olson said, "is almost like a living piece of art when there's stuff going on inside the classrooms. Look at that nursing lab," he said, pointing to the southwest corner of the commons, "and you'll see mannequins laying on the beds as students work on them."

Mayo Clinic Health System in Rochester donated eight medical beds to the OHS nursing program, and members of the Riverland Community College staff will come

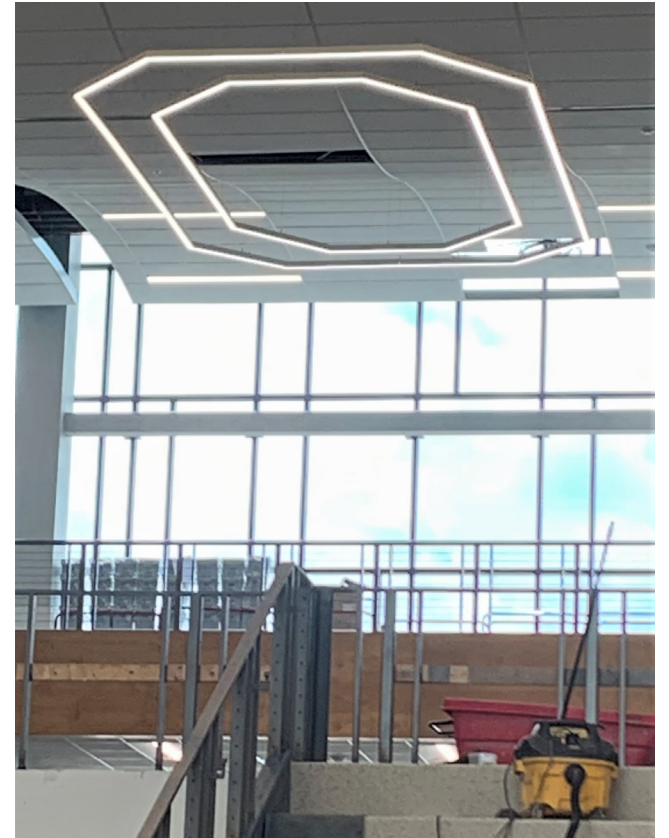
to OHS to teach – and use the nursing area for its own programs.

The nod to the city's parks and woods can be found in the auditorium lighting, as well as down the hallway of the music and auditorium spaces.

The LED lighting "branches" out along the walls of the auditorium, giving the appearance of abstract trees.

"Those trees ..." said OHS Band Director Pete Guenther, nearly at a loss for words. "We can do almost a million colors with those trees, so we can light the stage to match anything we're doing," from stage productions to band and choir concerts.

The hallway leading into the music suite features wood beams on the walls and ceiling.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

Typical school lighting takes a backseat on the ceiling above the media center of the new Owatonna High School with the outline of an "O." The school letter is visible from everywhere in the three-story commons.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

The Straight River is replicated in the terrazzo flooring of the new Owatonna High School, as it flows through the middle of the school.

"The beams are like trees," Kath said, "and they cast in the terrazzo the shadow of a tree. If you look at the floor, you'll see a shape that mimics the shadow of a tree."

The designs, he said, "are not right in your face, but it's intentional, and designed to connect us as a community – and it pays homage to that."

With so much emphasis placed on the future, school officials wanted

to "make sure that we connect ourselves to our history, too," Kath said.

There will be "multiple spaces in the school that will connect our history with what we have today," using items from the OHS Museum, he said.

The mural in the existing OHS commons will be acknowledged by a mural in the new school's activities wing, "paying tribute to the amazing events in

Continued on page 11



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

The walls of the Wenger Performing Arts Center feature LED lighting in the shape of abstract trees. They will allow for nearly a million colors to enhance productions and performances in the facility.

Continued from page 10

history that the school presents,” Kath said.
The exterior of the new

building will also provide glimpses of days gone by.
The lighted tower in front of the school will have six panels of

silkscreened glass that feature photos and high-lights of the past.
The content is a surprise, Kath said, and will be illuminated every night.

The two ornate lamp-posts that have stood outside the original 1921 OHS building are also

making the trip to the new school. The posts were donated by the classes of 1921 and 1922 and are inscribed as such.
The lampposts and the crest from above the main doors of the original building “will be saved and placed on the new plaza,” Kath said.

“The Straight River truly is flowing through the middle of the school, just like it does in our community.”

Kory Kath
OHS Principal

“Those need to come with us. When you’re sitting in the Foundation Room, you’ll be able to see them.”



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

The windows of various classrooms represent the feel of downtown Owatonna, something that was important to focus groups involved in the planning of the new Owatonna High School. The students will be visible, feeding into the concept of “learning on display.”

NEW OHS SCHEDULE

- **Aug. 22:** Open House for students and their families
- **Sept. 5:** First day of school for juniors and seniors
- **Sept. 6:** First day of school for freshmen and sophomores
- **Sept. 23:** Grand opening with public tours



OHS students can set their sights on Career Pathways

BY KAY FATE STAFF WRITER

This is definitely not your grandfather's high school – but he'd probably approve of what will be happening inside.

"Our focus and commitment is, 'find what you like, and it may not require a four-year degree,'" said Owatonna High School Principal Kory Kath.

"We've blurred those lines as having (college) be the only pathway to have you grow – and to be able to grow into a career that will be good for your family," he said.

That's been the goal of Career Pathways since its inception more than five years ago. It's grown and changed in the nearly three years that Brian Coleman has been overseeing the program.

He agrees with Kath's assessment of what today's students are facing.

A critical piece of what makes the program successful, Coleman said, is "that there's so many options for students now; we can't say that 'this is the right way.' We have to be

open and let them decide, because ultimately, this is their life."

The new OHS building, by its very design, will likely bring even more growth.

"With the layout of the new school, there's a lot of classes that students will have exposure to – even if they're not in the classes," Coleman said. "If they see something exciting happening in a class, or (other students) working on a project, it's going to pique their interest and make them say, 'wow, I wonder what that's all about – maybe I should've signed up for that.'"

That's the hope, anyway, he said.

"With the design being so open, it'll provide opportunities for students to maybe see things they weren't exposed to before ... and ask questions."

That will happen thanks to the large "storefront" windows into classrooms, including a birds-eye-view into the nursing lab that will be used by OHS students with an eye toward medicine, as well as Riverland Community

College students who are already on that path.

As the name implies, Career Pathways is about developing and connecting students with opportunities that lend themselves to a potential career, keeping the focus on the interests of the students.

The program has definitely been "enhanced" in the past couple of years, Kath said.

"A student along the way can try something, and even if it's something they find out isn't for them, they still have enough flexibility in their schedule that they can go explore a whole other career area," he said. "There are multiple fields of study they can look at throughout their four years."

The new equipment making its way into various parts of the new building, Kath said, "are machines that are truly in the industry today."

Within the arts, career, and technical education courses, activities, business, health and human services classes – "all of them have spaces that allow students to see themselves in a future career setting," he said. "We're trying to introduce students to a lot of these professions, so we're bringing them to the understanding of different skills and discovering what they're interested in."

So much of that depends on Coleman – and

the partnerships he has helped build with local businesses and the students who are looking to the future.

"Our industry partners have been excellent," he said. "We have great partnerships within this community. It doesn't matter what sector; they're willing to open their doors to students to come in and see what it's all about, and that's been so awesome."

Every school has a "certain student population that's pretty set, as far as the direction in which they believe they're going," Coleman said.

There are also students who may not be quite sure, but have an idea, "and then you have the students that just aren't really sure at all – and the greatest thing about Career Pathways is that we provide those opportunities to explore," he said.

The process is kickstarted by a career assessment taken by most students at OHS. Coleman interprets them with students on the start of their path, discussing their expectations and goals.

"Then I contact employers on their behalf," he said, "to either have the employer come in and visit with the student, or have the student go out – often, it's a combination."

If it seems to be a fit for everyone involved, "we set up a job shadow

FIELDS OF STUDY:

Business, Communication, Information Technology

- Business management, financial services, administrative systems
- Hospitality, tourism, event services
- Arts, design, innovation
- Communication, media, public relations

Health Sciences, Education, Human Development

- Human services, wellness
- Government, law, public safety

Engineering, Manufacturing, Agriculture

- Agriculture, food science, natural resources
- Power, transportation, technical systems
- Manufacturing, architecture, construction
- Engineering

"With the design being so open, it'll provide opportunities for students to maybe see things they weren't exposed to before ... and ask questions."

Brian Coleman

Career Pathways Coordinator

onsite, and (the student) can observe it in the field – then make a decision to pursue it or go back to the drawing board and look at something else."

The conversations along the way touch on many factors, including the job outlook in that field and where they can receive training for those careers.

"If they're going into a field that's highly com-

petitive, or requires more training, they need to know that and how to go about it," Coleman said.

Often, that can happen locally, which is also part of the goal.

"This is kind of the icing on the cake," Kath said, "saying we will have facilities that match what our commitment is for the career growth of our students."

CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR NEW HIGH SCHOOL!



Thank you all for being a great partner in designing your new high school. We are proud to be a part of your journey as you start the next chapter for Owatonna High School.



Congratulations to **Owatonna Public Schools** on the construction of their new high school!

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Pirkl achieves life skill from Pathways

BY KAY FATE STAFF WRITER

Joey Pirkl is honest about his future career plans:

“No idea,” he said, but now he knows he has a skill set that will serve him well no matter what he does.

“I took small engines in ninth-grade,” Pirkl said. “My dad is a mechanic, so I grew up around it, and that course interested me.”

When he needed a project for a different class, “I thought, ‘I’ll just work on this (snowblower) engine that’s not running.’”

Now entering his senior year at Owatonna High School, Pirkl is likely not pursuing a career in mechanics – though he admitted he may have inherited some mechanical ability from his father and grandfather.

“It was a fun, eye-opening experience,” he said of the Career Pathways program, and he’s gained the ability to assess or repair some things, thanks to the class – and his father, who mentored him through that snowblower engine repair.

“It taught me that I’m not going to get the answer right away,” Pirkl said. “You’re going to have to troubleshoot... I’d really like to stick with it.”

The son of John and Kim Pirkl, of Hope, he



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Joey Pirkl, right, who will be a senior at OHS this fall, works on a snowmobile engine with a little help from his dad, John. Joey took a small engines class as a freshman, and while he ultimately decided that won't be his career choice, he said the Career Pathways program is important.

said he sees the value in the Career Pathways options.

“It just makes you think about what you want to do as a teenag-

er,” Pirkl said, “instead of waiting until after you graduate (from high school), then being stuck and not knowing what to do.”

Knowing what you don't want to do is as important as know what you do want to do, he agreed.

A member of the OHS football and track teams,

he may consider a trade school for something “possibly sports related,” he said.

As for his brief foray into small engines, Pirkl

said his dad hadn't really encouraged him to take the class, but “he was smiling a lot when we were working together. I think he was happy.”



Continued from page 6

the old high school to do ... A year from now, we'll hopefully be sitting over (at the renovated building) when that's done. Then I'll just do my regular facilities work."

Some of that hasn't gone away: He still holds monthly maintenance meetings and a monthly head custodian meeting, "just to make sure we're all on the right page."

Olson becomes emo-

tional when he talks about the department that has been without his leadership for three years, most specifically, the last two years – when bids and construction consumed his days.

"Our manager and maintenance lead are picking up the slack on the day-to-day things," he said. "I have to give tons and tons of kudos to our whole facilities department. They've stepped up big-time in my absences,

"I'm an educator—I just happen to be doing something different at the end of my career."

Bob Olson

Facilities Director

to make sure we're still kicking butt."

Especially now, as the new facility approaches occupancy – right at the start of the new school year.

"Our busiest time of

the year in a normal season is summer," Olson said, "and then you add in the move from one school to another school ... And this is all new – we have to learn how to run this building

yet. This has been a big challenge, just all the moves, getting things in and out here, and they're trying to get to know this building."

The students and staff will also be allowed to get to know the building before it opens.

An open house for OHS students and their families is planned for Aug. 22; the first day of school for juniors and seniors is Sept. 5. Freshmen and sophomores

start Sept. 6.

A grand opening of the new school is set for Sept. 23; it will include public tours of the building.

The delay is intentional, district officials have said.

"The most important thing for me is that we invite the community in once it truly is our home," said OHS Principal Kory Kath. "It is not our home until students are actually learning there."

Miller to give nursing a shot

BY KAY FATE STAFF WRITER

For years, Miller – who will be a senior at the new Owatonna High School when school starts next month – has wanted to be a teacher.

History, he thought, at the middle school or high school level.

“The last five years, that’s what I wanted, what I planned,” he said. “Then I told myself to take a step back and explore other career paths. That’s when nursing came into play.”

Miller got a job this summer at Birchwood

Cottages, a memory care facility in Owatonna.

The goal is to achieve certification as a certified nursing assistant, or CNA, and the race is on. He also plans to take advantage of the Career Pathways program at OHS; specifically, he’ll participate in the Riverland Nursing program.

“I want to get my CNA whichever way I can get it faster,” Miller said, whether through practical experience and on-the-job training at Birchwood, or through the Riverland courses at school.

He knows the CNA cer-

tificate is the head start he will need as he heads off to college next fall.

The end-goal, Miller said, is the combination of his former and current career aspirations:

“I chose teaching and nursing because I like helping people,” he said, so the obvious solution is to teach nursing.

But first, his own education. The natural progression of nursing students is a CNA certification, then an LPN license and finally, an RN degree.

Realistically, Miller said, “I’ll probably need more than 10 years of

nursing before becoming a teacher, but I honestly don’t have a timeline, really – I just have a goal.”

When he started high school, Miller joined several clubs and organizations, which he said drained him.

“My main focus now is Link Crew, prom committee and SHOC (Students Helping Others Choose),” he said. He’s on the track team, and hopes to be involved in drama.

Miller, the son of Shelly and Kevin Miller of Owatonna, will take other college-level classes at OHS through the PSEO (Post-Sec-

ondary Enrollment Options) program this school year, for yet another leg up at college.

Using the Career Pathways program is vital for students like him, Miller said, who may have a few career options in mind.

“That’s exactly what I’m doing,” he said. “I’m

seeing if I’ll be fine in this field.”



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HITTING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

New OHS music department pays homage to Wenger

BY KAY FATE STAFF WRITER

Peter Guenther had a confession. “Something that sounds so weird but is the truth: I don’t know what windows are.”

Well, technically, he knows, but “for 22 years, I’ve never had a window.”

That’s the amount of time he’s been the band director for Owatonna High School. Guenther has held the position longer than anyone in the history of the school – though Harry Wenger likely has more name recognition.

In the new OHS, “I have one of the biggest windows,” he said, “and I have natural light pouring into my classroom, which will brighten everybody’s day, because it faces north.”

One of the other highlights is the placement of the Harry Wenger Music Suite and the Wenger Performing Arts Center.

“The music suite is across the hall from the gymnasium, so for concerts, we just walk across the hallway” instead of across the school, Guenther said.

Same goes for providing music within the performing arts center.

Remarkably, those weren’t even things that he requested during the design and user group stages.



“One of the first questions I got asked was, how big do you want the band room to be?” Guenther said.

“And this was my honest answer: I want to be able to fit a 120-piece marching band inside of it, uncomfortably, with percussion,” he said. “Because the worst-case scenario for me was the marching band when it’s raining... So I thought ahead. We’ll be able to rehearse effectively; it’ll

“I have one of the biggest windows, and I have natural light pouring into my classroom, which will brighten everybody’s day, because it faces north.”

Pete Guenther
OHS Band Director

be a little tight, but that’s fine.”

Guenther also wanted access to the football field. “Since my room is so

big, I have a fire door” leading outside, he said. “I can open that and walk right out, across the plaza and I’m in the stadium.”

One more thing: “I wanted an orchestra pit in the auditorium, and that is honored,” Guenther said. “It’s a cantilevered stage – it extends over the pit and can be completely covered and walked on and dance on, or covered with a net. We have choices.”

In many projects this size, “what you get is what you need – not necessarily everything you want,” he said, “and that’s OK.”

What he and the students did get is “the gift of

space; the gift of (instrument) lockers for every child,” Guenther said. “I also think about access. I have an exit right past the band room door that leads to the outside (parking lot), so I can park my coach buses out there and load the marching band practically right from my room. It’s very, very smart.”

Still, he said. “I teach my ensembles to have

Continued to page 21



RENDERING COURTESY OF OPS

The Harry Wenger Music Suite will contain a commons area, music and equipment storage and large classrooms for band, choir, and orchestra.

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pride in things that don’t have a lot to do with buildings and structures. I told the parents, we teach your children more about life, using music as a tool for it.

“At the end of the day, a school is an empty building without people in it,” Guenther said, “but I feel that filling the silence with the buzz of education gives a new school a very special identity, and I think success breeds success.”

He believes accessibility is the biggest strength of the new school – access for everyone.

“When I go into the gymnasium and I see the track, I can picture our

community members using that for walking, for exercising,” Guenther said. “I see this interplay between the community and the school; those bonds are going to explode.”

After 22 years in the district, he’s seen a little bit of everything, not all of it good.

“I want to say, ‘This is about the kids; this is about the future,’” he said. “We’re not giving them the Taj Mahal, we’re giving them a state-of-the-art educational facility and frankly, they deserve it. They’ve been stuck in a black-molded building. I’ve had ice dams in my (classroom) floors, water pouring into

my room, you name it.”

It was difficult, he admitted.

“I’ve had many guest artists and composers visit, and they’d walk into the old (band) room and say, ‘so, this is it, huh?’ And I’d say, ‘please, listen to the music’ – and it was beautiful,” Guenther said.

“That’s the message: I think we as a community need to have the respect, and let the kids have their school and their memories and be their own road-pavers as we move into the next decade,” he said.

“I think it will be the overwhelming voice that will say, ‘this is incredible.’”



PHOTO COURTESY OF OPS

Soundproof practice booths will be available for students to use in the Harry Wenger Music Suite at the new Owatonna High School.

OHS Museum group moves the past into the future

BY KAY FATE STAFF WRITER

If you've ever had to clean out a loved one's house – or really, even one of your own closets, you might get the sense of the job

handed to the Owatonna High School Museum committee.

The collection started innocently enough, when Darryl Hill, then the school's vice principal, took a souvenir during

the 1980s remodeling of the school's auditorium.

The seats were among the items being updated, so Hill took a metal end-cap from one of the rows.

"It had OHS forged into it," said Julie Kru-

ger, who serves on the committee.

"He hung it on his office wall, and people started bringing him things," she said. "Pretty soon, he had to have a place to keep it all."

For more than 30 years, that place was a set of glass cases in the hallway just outside the main office of the school.

Even in such a prominent spot, though, "the museum was camou-

flaged," said Andy McGuire, another committee member. Students and the public often walked past, not paying attention.

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Juanita Drabek holds a photo of the 1934 graduating class that was donated to the OHS Museum. Many family members realize the value of items to the history of the school, she said. The new high school will have exhibits in several places in the building and will see items switched out to keep the displays fresh.

STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

OHS CONSTRUCTION: 4 YEARS IN THE MAKING



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July 2021



August 2021



September 2021



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Federated makes unprecedented investment

Fetters: State-of-the-art facilities are needed



Jeff Fetters

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

Unprecedented. Amazing. Breath taking. Those are just a few words that come to mind in describing how businesses have rallied around the Owatonna School District to bring a new high school to the community.

Leading that effort has been Federated Insurance, which donated \$22 million toward the building of the high school.

Dr. Deb Henton, who serves as executive director of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators, agreed that Federated's gift is unusual and quite generous. She is amazed at the enormity of the gift. "The value they place on education is exceptionally pleasing.

It's great that a business would help out a district. Owatonna is very lucky to have that partnership," she said.

Federated Chairman Jeff Fetters recalled how three of the top executives were frustrated that there wasn't a new high school in Owatonna. "We couldn't find the people, and we thought what can we do to attract people here and keep them here," he said.

The idea involved supporting a new high school—in a substantial way. "We put a big number out there, and the board supported it," said Fetters. He added it wasn't a difficult decision at all for his board of directors to make in what's believed to be the largest single

about eight years ago. "We have no intentions of going anywhere else, and we want the best facility we can possibly have for our employees, their kids and their grand kids."

The board initially approved \$20 million for the school project. When the school ran into issues for securing a site, Federated jumped again by tossing another \$2 million for the land purchase.

Bob Olson, facilities director for Owatonna Schools, finds it unheard of to see the relationships that have been built with various community partners like Federated. "One of the things that I'm most proud of is not just our community support, but our businesses," he said.

Besides Federated,

"If we don't have state-of-the-art facilities, you won't attract state-of-the-art employees."

Jeff Fetters
Federated Chairman

donation from a corporation for such a project in Minnesota and possibly the country.

"Our presentation to the board was that this is an investment in our people and our employees," Fetters recalled of when he approached the board

others have stepped up in big ways. They include: Wenger Corporation, Wenger Family Foundation, Viracon, Gopher Sport, Owatonna Foundation, 761 Foundation, Rypka family, Life Fitness and Mayo Health Systems. Fetters' reasoning for

Federated's gift to the school district is simple.

"If we don't have state-of-the-art facilities, you won't attract state-of-the-art employees," he says.

Fetters used an analogy from the Field of Dreams, a popular baseball attraction in northern Iowa.

"If you build it, we will come," he said, stressing that "people are not going to come until we build it."

Fetters emphasized how Federated's gift was the "right thing to do for our employees and our city." He added, "This is an investment in our community."

He recalled how devastated he was in May 2019 when the initial levy referendum failed. He quickly learned after the first vote that many people hadn't voted. After a successful second referendum, Fetters realized that "finally, the silent majority spoke up."

Fetters said Superintendent Jeff Elstad wanted to wait until May 2020 to have another referendum vote. However, Fetters pushed hard to have it right away again in November 2019. And, in retrospect, Fetters is thankful for his persistence given by pandemic hit in March 2020 and shut down or severely impacted the world for

nearly two years. Had they waited until 2020 it likely wouldn't have happened.

"I give credit to Jeff Elstad for pushing it really hard," Fetters said.

Asked about his impressions of the new high school, Fetters smiled and said: "I jokingly said maybe I should go back to high school. You walk in the door, and I said wow, this is beautiful. This is stunning."

Any high-level employees Federated is attempting to recruit will definitely be given a tour of the

new high school, Fetters said.

He is excited about what the new high school will offer. "We have future employees coming out of the high school," Fetters said. "They will be better educated and better trained. We will be able to retain and attract great employees who are well trained and educated."

Fetters is also thrilled about other projects going on in Owatonna.

"We need to invest in the school and downtown to put a new face on Owatonna."

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Andy McGuire, a member of the OHS Museum committee, offers one example of what happens when papers or textiles are exposed to sunlight or fluorescent lighting over the years. One side of this royal blue OHS sweater faded to nearly gray after spending time in the museum display case.

Continued from page 22

Even worse, sunlight

and fluorescent light flooded the cases, resulting in plenty of fading

and damage to some of the papers and textiles inside.

Now, all those items – some previously stored in the tiniest of rooms, far away from the cases – will have a new home.

After completing an inventory and assessment – “we have a lot of buttons, a lot of pins” – the committee is building exhibits, grouping artifacts, and writing the stories to accompany them.

While the main exhibit will be displayed in the Foundation Room of the new high school, students and visitors alike will be able to find the district’s history in other relevant spots.

There will be exhibits outside the new OHS auditorium, outside the school’s music suite, in the new high school office, and at the district office, once it’s complete.

OHS Principal Kory Kath believes the students “will connect with it a little more, because it’s going to be in spaces they’ll be visiting and walking through.”

“While not everything in here is cool and valuable, there’s some stuff that’s really neat,” said McGuire, standing in a classroom in the C Tower of the existing high school – where the items not on display will be stored.

The museum has class rings dating back to 1912, with just a few years missing.

“The one thing we didn’t have until recently was a picture of the first OHS,” he said of the 1866 building that sat about two blocks north of the existing school. “I found one

on eBay – and I bought it.”

That’ll be on display at the new high school, as will an 1883 book he came across while the artifacts were being moved to their new storage room for inventory.

In it, “kids tell the story of ‘our school.’ Now, 1883 was a great time to ask Owatonna kids about the history of ‘our school,’ because their school burned down in 1882, and in 1883, the replacement ws built,” McGuire said.

“The rumor was that the parents hated the

dents’ names, addresses, grades, the curricula taught.

Binders full of information about most of the graduating classes contain newspaper stories, photos, obituaries, and “things that happened when they were in school,” said Juanita Drabek, a member of the museum committee.

“When they have a (class) reunion, they can go back through them,” she said.

Drabek, too, thinks the students will feel a con-

HOW TO HELP OHS MUSEUM:

The OHS Museum is funded entirely by donations. The committee sells yearbooks, and occasionally receives memorials from families of former or current students. They receive no financial help from the Owatonna School District.

school because they thought it was unsafe, but the city wouldn’t build them a new one – so they burned it down.”

The 1883 school was also destroyed by fire, leading to the construction of the 1921 building that is part of the now former OHS.

The move to the new site also has its place in history, McGuire said, “because this is the first time we’ve ever moved out of a high school in Owatonna.”

But records remain: books, filled with stu-

nection to the past while walking through their new school.

“I think it makes (the museum) more special, even for the current high school students to see that, ‘hey, in 25 years, we’re going to see our stuff in here.”

For now, the committee admits to being overwhelmed with the task ahead – including actually moving the items to the new school.

They expect to have 90% of the work done before school starts in September.

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