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Renovate or Build New?

By William DeJong

Renovate or build new? This age-old question goes far beyond renovation vs. new construction because it involves multiple issues and community stakeholders. However, the answer is very straightforward: provide the best place for students to learn.



While many people think renovating existing facilities is more expensive and time-consuming than building new ones, that's not always the case. In fact, renovation can often be accomplished for less than the cost of a new building. It just requires careful planning and conscientious effort. Michigan's Grand Rapids Public School District is the perfect example.

Like many school districts nationwide, Grand Rapids experienced a school building boom in the 1920s and 1950s. In 2004, the district and community created a building improvement plan to determine appropriate school improvements.

The goal was to provide appropriate and attractive spaces flexible enough to meet the needs of new initiatives, extend the life of each building for more than 30 years, meet all health and safety codes, and comply with federal and local mandates. After all, the buildings were approximately 50 to 80 years old, and they were constructed before energy conservation, the American with Disabilities Act, and the advent of personal computers.

Nearly all of the buildings' systems — roofs, boilers, electrical, mechanical, windows, etc. — had reached or gone beyond their life expectancies.

Phase I of the Building Improvement Plan involved the construction and renovation of seven elementary and four middle schools — four of which involved some debate regarding the question: renovate or build new?

The debate was quite short for two of the schools because it was clearly smarter and more cost-effective to renovate rather than build new. The estimated construction cost to renovate and build an addition at Harrison Park Elementary/Middle School was \$24.9 million, while a new facility would have cost more than \$30 million.

The building, built in 1924 with English gothic architecture, has obvious historic details that made it worth restoring. It reopened in September 2007, under budget and on time.

There was also little debate about Palmer Elementary School. This 1950s single-story school included revolutionary features for its time, such as excellent ventilation and natural light. In the current age of environmental awareness, the district decided to renovate and focus the planning process on green design.

The estimated cost for a moderate renovation with an addition was \$5.3 million, versus \$10.9 million for a new building. To green it up even further, new ventilation, air conditioning, and more natural light were added to the facility.

The building also presented the ideal opportunity to recast current space. For example, the original gym became the media center because it was undersized for current physical education activities but the perfect size to host a library and computer lab. The school reopened in January 2007 — seven months ahead of schedule and on budget.

Burton Elementary/Middle School was a different story because it presented an example of renovation costing about the same as a new building. However, it was renovated to preserve its historic architectural detailing, which includes a Byzantine-style tiled entryway and terra cotta trim.

There were two more major reasons to renovate. First, there wasn't enough property available to build a new facility, and second, the school had always been a point of pride for the community. It was the first school in Michigan that cost \$1 million or more to build in 1925. The \$28.2 million renovation project was completed in 2008.

Alger Middle School represented a good example of the district choosing to build new. The existing facility didn't have enough square footage to match the district's middle school standards. If it was renovated, it would have needed an addition, which would have under-utilized the existing building. The new building is 80,000 square feet and sits beautifully on the property.

The last of the eleven projects in Grand Rapids was Cesar E. Chavez Elementary, which opened in 2009. It wasn't part of the original building improvement plan, but after several projects came in under the budget, it was added to the program. The original building was from the 1950s, but it was demolished and replaced with a new energy-efficient school with larger classrooms, team rooms for collaboration, a lunchroom separate from the gymnasium, and a rooftop garden.

Each school in the building improvement plan was custom-built with the latest school design and technology to help facilitate instruction and learning, increase safety and security, and enhance neighborhood use. Eight of the eleven projects are built with green building techniques, and five are eligible or have already been approved for LEED certification.

There's no question this entire process revitalized the Grand Rapids community. People living in the neighborhoods where schools underwent renovation and construction made home improvements, which increased property values.

The building improvement plan also spurred related developments, such as street and park improvement. In addition, community members developed an interest in how community services reach their neighbors.

Renovating vs. renovation should be determined case by case. The Grand Rapids story resulted in approximately half of the schools renovated and half replaced.

These improvements did not happen by chance. It happened because district administrators, parents, teachers and community leaders actively participated in a planning process aimed at making the area a better place to live, learn, work and play.

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