

Cha-Ching

Gallia voters invest in future with school levy approval

By Josh Blair

Southeast Ohio Magazine, Spring 2006

It's a relatively mild January afternoon in Cheshire, Ohio – 49 degrees, 14 above average. The students at River Valley High School are thankful for this; the fair weather makes it easier to concentrate in class and their jackets can remain in their lockers. River Valley's heating system is, to put it lightly, not in the best operating condition.

At any one point in time on any given cool day, temperatures can vary 20 degrees from one side of the building to the other. Summer isn't much better, though, with temperatures climbing past 100 degrees. Cranking up the air conditioning at River Valley means opening more windows, assuming they will open. Many are wired shut or missing handles because parts are no longer made for numerous components of this 50-year-old building.

To call River Valley's facilities poor is an understatement. In fact, there isn't a red marker large enough to give the building a big, fat F. The faculty even has a saying: "If you don't laugh, you cry."

Among all of the River Valley Raiders memorabilia in principal Michael Jacobs' office are two tin bean cans, one numbered 13 and the other 43. "Thirteen is my lucky number," he says. The other number signifies how many cans Michael places throughout River Valley's halls when it rains. Many areas of the ceiling, 43 apparently, have rusted through, causing leaks. In the winter, once the ice begins to thaw, "sometimes it rains

inside when it's not even raining outside," Michael says. In one hall, Michael, a mustached, fast-talking former construction manager, "jerry rigged," as he calls it, a makeshift gutter where the rain falls, drains into an aluminum pan and overflows into one of the cans. "Isn't this just a wonderful little thing?" he says about his contraption.

Why all the jerry rigging? It's simple: Gallia County Local Schools last received money for construction in 1983, before any of the current students were born. And if 22 years sounds bad, it gets worse. The last time voters approved new construction in the Gallipolis City School District, encompassing Gallia County's largest city, Dwight D. Eisenhower won his second term in office -- 50 years to be exact, before any of the current students' parents were even in school.

And the city schools are in just as poor shape as the county schools. Elementary school restrooms have been converted into classrooms, students eat lunch in a gym because there is no cafeteria, two classes are crammed into the same classroom, a ceiling fan came loose, nearly landing on a student, and teachers use hallways for storage. The list goes on and on.

But now, change is on the way. Last November, a 7.4-mill bond issue, intended to raise \$43 million in 28 years, passed for the Gallia County Local School District. In the Gallipolis City School District, voters approved a 7.2-mill bond issue and a 1.5-mill permanent improvement levy that will generate \$25 million in 28 years. This money will be augmented by \$33 million from the Ohio Schools Facilities Commission and a \$1 million donation from Holzer Consolidated Health Systems.

A Long Time Coming

So the big question is “why so long?” Why 50 years since any new construction money for city schools and 22 years for the county schools? It’s hard to pinpoint, says Ryan Smith, president of the Gallia County Chamber of Commerce. “Ask ten people,” he says, “and you’ll get nine different answers.”

Bidwell resident Donald Curry’s answer is clear – taxes. All money for the county schools and \$25 million for the city schools are coming from taxpayers. Each mill brings in \$1 for every \$1000 of a property’s assessed value, which is 35 percent of the true value. A \$100,000 home is taxed on \$35,000, meaning for a 7.4-mill levy, annual property tax goes up by \$259.

Donald, a 68-year-old Navy retiree, lives on a fixed income and has seen his taxes nearly triple since moving from Massachusetts to Gallia County 14 years ago. For him, the forthcoming property tax hike, added to increases in medication and health care costs, is quite a struggle.

“I’m happy for the kids and the teachers,” Donald says, but refers to the tax as unconstitutional because it is only paid by homeowners.

A large part of the city levy’s success stems from the state picking up 64 percent of the tab as part of the Ohio Department of Education’s Exceptional Needs Program, which determined the city schools to be in poor enough shape to warrant state dollars. The city schools levy passed with an overwhelming 4,046 votes to 1,672 votes.

There have been four unsuccessful attempts in the city school district to build a new high school, in ’78, ’85, ’98, and ’99, but none of those levies involved state money.

Some who voted “no” in the past approved this levy, Ryan says, because a “no” vote meant no money from the state -- \$33 million for another school district to enjoy.

The county school district opted to have taxpayers bear the entire burden because in order to receive aid, the state required the closing of an additional building, leaving the Cheshire area without a school. County school board members believed the benefit of having another school justified losing possible state funding. But with the Kyger Creek and Gavin power plants located in the district, \$26 million of the \$43 million comes from the increase in those companies’ property taxes alone. Voters in the county school district approved the levy by a much smaller margin -- 2,871 to 2,368.

Kids Have Their Say

Regardless of funding sources, the slim county victory and the large city victory both have been slimmer were it not for the efforts of dedicated community members. When driving through Gallipolis last October and early November, everyone saw spots. Billboards, road signs, car magnets, buttons, T-shirts, and television ads all advertised Red Dots for Kids, the campaign for the city levies’ approval spearheaded by Ryan.

And while red dots were prevalent in the city, yellow arrows pointed toward the sky all across the county district as the logo for Quality Schools for Quality Kids. Co-chair Dale Holcomb, along with his wife Connie, helped organize the Red Dots’ sister group because he has two sons in Gallia County schools.

Connie says their two boys came home after visiting schools in adjoining counties, all of which have received new schools in the past decade, and asked why they can't have nice, new schools. "What do you tell them?" she says.

Despite the concerns of residents like Donald, Connie's motto was simple: "You gotta stop and think about the kids." She and other campaigners worked right through Election Day, urging voters to "remember the kids" as they stepped into polls. "If we would not have had the group of parents we had, who worked so long and so hard," Connie says, "(the election) would have been a lot closer."

Although more than 600 parents, teachers and residents banded together in one of the two groups, some voters needed to hear straight from students. Cameron Muncy, a 16-year-old River Valley junior, helped rally support for the bond issue, though he will never, as a student, step foot in the new building. Cameron, along with fellow students, gave first-hand accounts about the school's conditions to constituents during rallies, fundraisers and festivals.

"River Valley is a great school, but the building is just falling apart," Cameron says. "When you go to other schools and see how nice their facilities are and then they come here, you feel embarrassed. It's hard to think that they have (nice facilities) and then we don't. It's almost kind of depressing that we don't."

Even though these schools are finally getting what they have needed for a long time, Gallia County superintendent Charla Evans is quick to remind that a new building does not equate to a good education. Even with the buildings in such sad shape, the schools in both districts have been producing high-achieving students for years. Thanks

to the efforts and perseverance of teachers and faculty, students such as Amanda Dye, a 2003 graduate of River Valley, can study linguistics at Harvard University.

Amanda says she has the utmost respect and admiration for the teachers in Gallia County. But while Amanda is proud to be a former Raider, she admits that the schools in her home county are lagging behind, especially in the areas of math and science. The poor chemistry labs and lack of advanced math courses at River Valley hinder students interested in those fields, she says. With two younger sisters attending Gallia County schools, Amanda has a vested interest in the future of education in the area. “For my sisters to compete on a level with the rest of the country,” she says, “we need to put more of a focus on education.”

And the levies will do just that, says University of Cincinnati President Nancy Zimpher, a 1964 graduate of Gallia Academy. President Zimpher says the levies will act as a catalyst in the region, continuing to invest in education. “Once you start investing,” she says, “it’s hard to turn back.”

She shares Amanda’s concerns about inadequate math and science programs. As a college administrator, she sees students in those fields who are less competitive need remediation or just flock away from them entirely, leaving the country short of domestic engineers, doctors, architects and educators. Without proper facilities, “how are high schools supposed to meet goals in math and sciences?” Zimpher asks.

The Future is Now

In addition to improving the quality of the schools and the quality of the students, the levies could improve the overall quality of Gallia County. One of the first things surveyed by potential residents and businesses looking to relocate there is the schools, Ryan says. Often times, it is hard for them to not judge a book by its cover and see past the dilapidated buildings, the crowdedness and the clutter. According to Dale, the county's biggest employer, Holzer Medical Center, threatened to move to Jackson and cease new development in Gallia County if the levies did not pass. "We were to the point where we not only couldn't attract business, we were losing business," he says.

Fortunately, things are starting to change. "For the first time in a long time, people are going to be looking to live here," Ryan says. He calls the \$100 million total in new construction a positive investment for the area, and one that will cause a ripple effect. The hope is to hire local subcontractors for some of the projects. And even though much of the work will be done by outside companies, their workers still have to eat, shop and buy gas, meaning more money for local businesses. This, in turn, could bring new businesses and new residents to the area. The start of an economic boom is ahead. "Every time we improve our education," Ryan says, "it's going to help the community in the long run."

After a decades-long battle, the seeds of tomorrow have been planted in Gallia County. Now it is time for residents to reap the rewards.

Content copyright 2006 Southeast Ohio Magazine