

# SCHOOL FACILITIES WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS



**HAMILTON  
COUNTY  
SCHOOLS**

August 2023

# Letter from Mayor Wamp and Superintendent Dr. Robertson

If you're like us, you could close your eyes and remember the halls and classrooms of all the schools you attended. Many of our best memories, first friends, and favorite teachers were in those buildings. Throughout history, places of learning have been thought of as sacred ground. And rightly so.

But in recent years, unacceptable conditions at some Hamilton County schools have dominated headlines and even led to students taking action. In the worst cases, the memories some of our students may keep of their school facility will be leaky roofs, flooded playgrounds, or failing HVAC systems.

To be clear, school facilities don't dictate success. For example, despite some of the worst facility conditions in the county, CSLA performed as one of the best schools in Tennessee. Last year, it was finally rewarded with a new campus.

But the quality of our school facilities does matter.

Modern, dignified facilities give confidence to students, teachers, and, importantly, parents. Efficient facilities mean lower maintenance costs, which can be better invested in the classroom. Smart school zones maximize taxpayer dollars in public education by balancing enrollment across all of our schools as Hamilton County grows. As our school system continues to emphasize career pathways, dynamic facilities empower students to develop skills ranging from healthcare to IT to construction.

Nearly one year ago, we convened a small group of local leaders to develop a roadmap to transform Hamilton County's school facilities for a generation to come. These recommendations are not for the faint of heart, but the status quo has left us in this difficult predicament. We believe that each proposal we have made will improve quality of the education for every student affected by these recommendations and establish a principled model for investing in school facilities which can be replicated for decades to come.

45,000 students, from Soddy-Daisy to East Lake, are depending on us to provide school buildings that will enable them to grow and prosper from the classroom to the athletic field. Let's be bold for them.



Weston Wamp  
Hamilton County Mayor



Dr. Justin Robertson  
Hamilton County Schools  
Superintendent

# Focus Areas

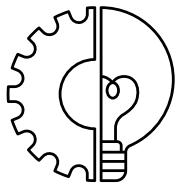
First and foremost, the facilities working group led with the vision that future investments into school facilities would be made in the best interest of students and teachers to facilitate safe, modern and inspiring learning environments.

## FRAMEWORK FOR TIF/PILOT FUNDS



Several criteria should guide the use of tax dollars generated from TIF and PILOT agreements, starting with consideration of the affected school zones to determine if any capital investments are necessary. It is important to ensure the allocation of funds aligns with the original intent of the economic development agreement and the workforce needs and educational programming associated with the TIF or PILOT should be weighed as facility priorities are set.

## INNOVATIVE AND ADAPTIVE REUSE MODELS



With construction costs exploding in recent years, innovative and adaptive reuse models can provide cost-effective solutions to meet facility needs. Consideration should be given to converting underutilized buildings or renovating existing schools to accommodate the growing student population, particularly in parts of the county where commercial real estate is abundant.

## ATHLETICS



High school athletics have been described as the front door of the high school experiences for students and parents alike. HCS and Hamilton County Government should seek partnerships with organizations like U.S. Express, and explore private fundraising opportunities to enhance athletic facilities. Public-private collaborations can provide additional resources to support athletic programs and level the playing field between public and private schools.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



Over the last 11 months, the Facilities Task Force has conducted an in-depth review of Hamilton County School facilities. The aim was to evaluate the current state of our school buildings and provide recommendations to make the system more efficient and aligned with the goals of Opportunity 2030.

# **Focus Area: Framework for TIF/Pilot Funds**

Tax increment financing (TIF) and payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT) are economic development tools used to incentivize investment and development in certain designated areas. The original intent of TIFs and PILOTs is to catalyze development that may not otherwise occur.

Last fall, the Hamilton County Commission voted to allocate 100% of future tax dollars generated by TIFs and PILOTs to school infrastructure. Previously, 60% went to schools and 40% went to Hamilton County general government. The change highlights the need to regularly assess infrastructure and facility needs related to TIFs/PILOTs.

It is important to ensure the allocation of funds aligns with the original intent of the economic development agreement and the workforce needs and educational programming associated with the TIF or PILOT should be weighed as facility priorities are set

When prioritizing potential facility improvements, it is recommended that a committee be formed to assess the need based on the above priorities.

## **Committee Make-Up:**

Hamilton County Mayor

Superintendent of Schools

Chair of the Hamilton County Commission

Chair of the Hamilton County School Board

Chief Financial Officer, Hamilton County Government

By taking a disciplined approach to using TIF/PILOT funds based on clear priorities, we can ensure TIF/PILOT spending is targeted and impactful in advancing the educational outcomes of students, workforce development and overall quality of life in these designated areas.

# **Focus Areas: Innovative and Adaptive Reuse Models**

The Facilities Task Force has recommended pursuing innovative and adaptive reuse models to maximize efficiency of taxpayer dollars for upgrading school facilities.

Hamilton County has a strong history of creatively repurposing buildings to save costs, including:

- Acquiring the vacant Cigna building in East Brainerd for the expansion of East Brainerd Elementary
- Planning a transformation of the old Gateway building in downtown into a Career and Technical School
- Converting the former Lakeside Elementary into the new K-12 CSLA campus

Continuing this spirit of innovation, the Task Force advises:

- Renovating existing county-owned spaces instead of new construction when feasible
- Seeking public-private partnerships and community funding sources
- Prioritizing cost-effective solutions limiting the use of public money

By applying fiscally responsible and resourceful thinking, Hamilton County can implement the Task Force's recommendation to maximize funding.

Past creative projects have revitalized buildings across the county while saving tax payer dollars. With the same fiscal stewardship moving forward, we can upgrade school facilities to support student success for years to come.

# Focus Area: **Athletics**

Hamilton County Schools aims to improve the overall condition of its athletic facilities by investing in much-needed upgrades. This will provide students with higher quality and safer spaces to participate in school sports and activities.

A key part of this plan is partnering with local companies to help fund the costs of these upgrades. For example, U.S. Express recently donated \$2 million to turf two high school football fields. This generous donation allows those schools to provide better field conditions for their athletic teams.

Moving forward, Hamilton County Schools will seek similar partnerships with area businesses. This will alleviate the tax burden on residents to pay for athletic facility improvements. The school district may offer naming rights or sponsorship opportunities to companies willing to contribute.

By upgrading athletic facilities across Hamilton County Schools, we can provide students with better resources for athletics, physical education, and recreational activities. This will lead to greater engagement in school activities and healthier lifestyles for students. Improved facilities build school pride and bring communities together to support our students.

# Task Force Recommendations

## Years 1 - 3:

### **Expand Eastside and East Lake Elementary**

- Large expansions to Eastside and East Lake Elementary will allow for the closure of Clifton Hills Elementary, an aging, overcrowded school located in a flood zone

### **Replace Soddy Daisy Middle School**

- Dramatically expand Daisy Elementary to create a K-12 experience on the shared campus of Daisy Elementary and Soddy Daisy High School. This will allow for growth in the Soddy Daisy area while strengthening the relationship between SDMS and SDHS, while eliminating the current Soddy Daisy Middle School facility

### **Reinvest in Brainerd High School**

- Brainerd High School's declining enrollment presents the county with an opportunity to align the school's academic and athletic mission with others like Signal Mountain and Tyner Academy by co-locating middle school and high school. Closing Dalewood Middle School and expanding and renovating Brainerd's campus will ignite a new era of greatness at one of our community's proudest schools.

### **Renovate Gateway into a Flagship Campus featuring CTE**

- The Golden Gateway campus presents an opportunity to build on Hamilton County's legacy of excellence in magnet schools and career and technical education.

# Task Force Recommendations

## Years 1 - 3:

### An All-New Elementary School in the Heart of Hixson

- Build a new elementary school on the large site of Dupont Elementary, consolidating three of the four small, aging schools (Alpine Crest, Dupont, Hixson, and Rivermont) onto one world class campus

### Renovate former Cigna campus into East Brainerd Elementary

- Follow through on plans to provide for continued growth in East Brainerd by developing the recently acquired Cigna facility into an expansion of East Brainerd Elementary

### Expand Thrasher Elementary to Keep Pace with Growth

- Thrasher Elementary is well known as one of Tennessee's finest elementary schools, but rapid growth of young families on Signal Mountain has overwhelmed the current facility.

### Renovate Schools in Lookout Valley

- Invest in Lookout Valley's two schools, where some of the county's most dynamic, growing communities are zoned

# Task Force Recommendations

## Years 4 - 7:

### Expand Magnet Seats

- Find a new location for CCA that opens seats and locates them closely to the downtown theater district
- Find a new location for Normal Park Upper and Lower to increase seats

### Prioritize Efficiency

- Continue to explore co-located middle-high schools to provide continuity for students and achieve cost savings from an operational perspective
- Continue pursuing solutions to maximize usage of underutilized facilities like Woodmore Elementary

### Continued Modernization

- Modernize excellent, but aging schools like Big Ridge Elementary as they hit 50 years in service
- Modernization of similar era high schools, i.e. Hixson, Central, Ooltewah, East Ridge

### Plan for Growth

- Invest proactively based on growth patterns, such as Hunter Middle School expanding to include high school if growth continues in Ooltewah/Harrison.

# Next Steps

## Community Feedback



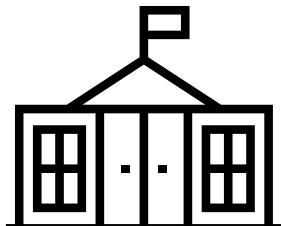
Over the next two months, Mayor Weston Wamp and Superintendent Dr. Justin Robertson will gather feedback on the Facilities Task Force Report. These efforts will allow residents to voice concerns, ask questions, and share input on proposed upgrades.

## Funding



In the Fall of 2023, Mayor Weston Wamp will release a plan for funding the School Facilities Working Group recommendations for years 1 - 3. This will enable a generational investment in modernizing school facilities to support student .

## School Board and County Commission



The Hamilton County School Board and County Commission will play an integral role in finalizing the facilities plan. Their feedback will help shape the final recommendations before voting to approve and secure financing.

By working collaboratively, the school board and county commission can analyze the plan to ensure it aligns with the district's needs and priorities. Their partnership will be critical to crafting a funding solution that upgrades school facilities without raising taxes, while still gaining broad community support. Their input and approval will help transform the Facilities Task Force vision into reality.

