

Feasibility Study Presentation of the Rochester High School Repurposing Project

Fairweather Consultants will present the results of the feasibility study for repurposing the Rochester High School (RHS) building on Wednesday, July 13th at 7:00 PM in the RHS auditorium.

The Rochester Select Board (SB) and Rochester Stockbridge Unified District (RSUD) gave approval to the RHS Repurposing Committee to explore options and feasibility of repurposing the former high school building. On behalf of the Town, the Committee secured a \$50,000 VT Community Development Planning Grant in 2021, and retained the services of Fairweather Consulting of New Paltz, NY, and Gregg Gossens GBA Architecture of Montpelier, VT to review the Committee's proposed uses for the building, estimate the capital and operating costs, and to advise on the means and funding sources to pay for building upgrades and its sustainability.

Based on the consultant's work to date, Vic Ribaud and Kathryn Schenkman, co-chairs of the RHS Repurposing Committee, report that the estimated cost for building renovation, adjusted for the current rate of inflation, would be \$3.1 million. This work, which could be done in phases over time, includes replacement of the heat and electric systems and upgrading the building envelope for maximum energy efficiency, putting it on a path to net zero. Additionally, the estimated annual operating costs, adjusted for the current rate of inflation, would be around \$100,000.

The Committee is encouraged by the recent funding for this project from Senator Sanders' Congressionally Designated Funds, in the amount of \$1.5 million, pending final Congressional approval. These funds require matching funds and an environmental assessment of the property. With support from Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission (TRORC) and VT Dept. Housing and Community Development, the Committee has begun the environmental assessment process and is exploring a full range of funding sources and grant opportunities towards the match.

Through a community engagement process begun in February 2020, in which participants identified and prioritized community needs, the Committee developed a multi-use facility proposal that includes: childcare, older adult day center, a Lifelong Learning Center, including a Makerspace, and business rental spaces.

Alternatives to repurposing the building include, but are not limited to, demolition at an estimated cost of up to \$1 million, an alternate yet to be identified use of the site, or complete abandonment of the building, allowing it to fall into total disrepair. Expert consultants advised RSUD against shuttering the building, stating that without heat and power the building foundation slab will heave, destroying the building.

Whether or not the Town acquires the building from the RSUD (for \$1.00), and associated costs for operation and maintenance, has been described by some as the most important financial

decision the Town will make in decades. The Select Board has decided that Rochester voters will make that decision at a special referendum, yet to be scheduled.

There is conviction among Committee members and supporters of the project that repurposing of the 33,000 sq. ft. RHS building located in the Town's village center, is essential to the Town's sustainability and future economic development. Others strongly believe that the renovation and operating costs noted above present a daunting financial challenge to the Town. Results of the feasibility study will provide information and perspective intended to inform Rochester voters of the pros and cons of this large and complex project.

The Repurposing Committee strongly encourages all community members to attend the informational public meeting and presentation on July 13th to learn more, ask questions and contribute to this important discussion. More information is available on the Committee's website: <http://rhsrepurposingproject.org>