

Community Engagement New Berlin, IL



INSPIRE Our TRADITION. Our VISION. Our FUTURE.

With growing enrollment and decades-old facilities with space constraints, New Berlin Community Unit School District #16 began to explore what the next step would be for its future students.

In early 2019, New Berlin undertook a district-wide strategic campaign to design a process that strengthens communications within the community. Their first effort was to study the school facilities and understand community perceptions about the direction of the district.

New Berlin turned to Graham & Hyde Architects, Inc., which specializes in education planning and design. The firm collaborated with Dr. Rod Wright of Unicom Arc to lead small group exercises.

G&H worked with the district-formed Inspire Committee to formulate a clear vision of potential design and construction projects.

Comprised of about 20 New Berlin community members, the Inspire Committee gathered community priorities regarding long-range planning for the school district facilities, particularly the junior high and senior high.

"We wanted to figure out what our ideal school would include that would align with the diverse interests of our community, from fine arts to sports to agriculture, and of course academics," explained Kris Neuman, New Berlin resident and co-chair of the Inspire Committee.

"We asked G&H to look at our historical enrollment and calculate our projected growth; from there, we wanted to come up with a building plan that would accommodate our district's desired programs, along with our projected growth over the next 10 to 20 years."

The Challenges

One of the Inspire Committee's first steps was a community-wide survey in spring 2019 that asked which educational features were most important. "Instructional spaces that incorporate best practices" and "permanent learning spaces" received some of the highest numbers, with 75% and 70%, respectively, of survey respondents ranking them "extremely important."

The Inspire Committee also held nine evening community meetings in three towns, starting in August 2019.

"Small towns evolve and change; New Berlin has a unique set of challenges but also a unique set of opportunities because the west side of





Springfield keeps growing into our district," said Dr. Adam Jones, professor at Illinois College who served as Board Liaison between the board of education and the Inspire Committee. "Because of the unique makeup of this town, we felt

that we needed to have upfront conversations about what these changes might be like and create unified momentum."

With input from the initial surveys, Graham & Hyde provided analysis of three possible paths:

- Do nothing
- Renovating existing facilities
- Constructing new facilities

Numbers helped to provide a clearer direction. When Graham & Hyde examined the district's growth over the past 25 years, they found that New Berlin CUSD #16 has grown 5.28% on average every five years. The high school has grown 5.54% on average every five years, with Kindergarten enrollment increasing 11.97% on average every five years.

G&H also studied classroom utilizations to see if classrooms are truly full throughout each day. They provided the life cycle costs of existing buildings, estimates on construction costs and illustrations based on various options.

"With our extensive experience in the education industry, we primarily helped New Berlin with examining the current school facilities to see if there was justification to build a new school. Like many districts, they were asking what should be done with their schools, what new school buildings would look like and how much these dreams cost," said Jamie Cosgriff, Graham & Hyde's project architect.

Cosgriff attended nearly every community forum, as well as Inspire Committee meetings, to provide information and answer questions from the audience.

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The Results

The Inspire Committee found "overwhelming community support" for the construction of a new facility for a junior and senior high school serving grades 6-12, along with significant infrastructure and athletic facility improvements.

The committee recommended a construction bond referendum of \$45-47 million. After consideration, the New Berlin school board modified the final amount to \$39.5 million, and the referendum has been placed on the ballot for the county election in March 2020.

"We are one of few districts in the area that are continuing to grow," Neuman explained. "We are in a good financial position, and our funds balance keeps increasing every year. But our large elementary school is feeding into an undersized high school. We're at the point in time when a new facility needs to happen for our students."

Partnering with Graham & Hyde in managing the strategic planning efforts "gave us an anchor point and helped us look at the facts versus the anecdotes," Jones noted.

"For example, we believed enrollment had grown, but G&H provided a clear chart with the exact numbers," he said. "That was a stabilizing aspect so we had a foundation to build off."

"Throughout the entire process, G&H was instrumental in helping us move forward; most of us haven't ever participated in a process like this, so they gave us perspective on what to expect."

Regardless of the outcome of March's election, the community-based process of the Inspire Committee has undoubtedly set the stage for other New Berlin district efforts going forward.

"The process they utilized in engaging the public was new to the school district. This group was essentially charged not only with this project but also with creating the prototype of making decisions in the future," Cosgriff said. "These efforts were meant to strengthen the dialogue for important decisions in the district instead of a top-down approach. The hope is that this transparent, inclusive process lay the foundation for how New Berlin will move forward in the future."