REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

For the

The Van Wert City Schools

Eggerss Stadium Renovation Project

August 13, 2020

Van Wert City Schools
Education • Innovation • Tradition

National Community Development Services, Inc.
2449 Commerce Street Suite 230
Atlanta, Georgia 30009
(404) 281-7732
Howard Benson, Lead Consultant

BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2017 Van Wert City Schools, assisted by the Ohio School Board Association, surveyed Van Wert School District's 1,330 registered voters about options for its football facilities. A total of 71% indicated that they favored renovating Eggerss Stadium. A total of 80% also said they would support a bond issue to help fund the project. Two other options were presented to voters—constructing a new stadium at Van Wert High School, or demolishing the existing stadium and building a new one on the site.

A *Stadium Facilities Committee* had determined that the aging stadium was deteriorating and had long been in need of much more than patching its crumbling concrete. The committee researched options relating to refurbishment, new construction, demolition, as well as the costs of each option. In October, 2017 the committee recommended that the Board of Education adopt the option favored by the majority of citizens completing the surveys--*renovation of Eggerss Stadium*…. IF the community could raise the funding for the project.

Members of the Board of Education acknowledged the Facilities Committee recommendations, and are committed to providing first class athletic facilities that are up-to-date, safe and accessible. *However, paying for such facilities is a daunting challenge*.

- A **bond issue** is not a prudent funding solution due to the financial state of the District. Despite the 2017 survey showing approval of the renovation option, debt service would limit maintaining or expanding educational priorities.
- **Operating funds** are already stretched thin, and State of Ohio funding has been historically unpredictable. Financially, the Van Wert school system is stable, but income is not growing. There is no room in the budget for a major capital expense such as the Eggerss renovation.
- A **school levy** may be needed in the near future to help pay for continuing Van Wert's excellent curriculum, but a major capital expense would severely cripple that academic funding.
- **Community fundraising** is the logical option, especially when there is broad citizen support. However, a major capital campaign will require a

number of six figure gifts and higher, not just the token giving typical of one of Van Wert's numerous "worthy causes."

NCDS was retained to conduct a funding feasibility Analysis to determine if the necessary financial support would be forthcoming if a communitywide campaign were to be implemented.

METHODOLOGY

After months of detailed planning by the engineering and architectural firms for the renovations, NCDS was given the go ahead in January, 2020 to commence its work. NCDS began crafting a "Case for Support" which set forth the rationale for the renovation of Eggerss Stadium and the additional facilities at the High School Athletic Complex. This "discussion document" would be used in conducting personal, confidential interviews with those capable of providing useful input and, possibly, funding to the proposed project.

A list of approximately 50 opinion leaders and potential donors was compiled from Board and staff recommendations in order to create a diverse and representative sample. Each potential interviewee was e-mailed a copy of the "*Case for Support*" along with a letter from Board of Education President, *Anthony Adams* requesting an interview with Howard Benson from NCDS. Personal phone calls were made by *Anthony Adams* to schedule appointments. In late February of 2020 *Howard Benson* conducted 37 confidential interviews in the Van Wert area. A comprehensive questionnaire was used in each interview, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their input in order to secure the most candid insights and opinions about the proposed project.

INTERVIEWEE LIST

The following representative mix of 37 individuals, business leaders, educators, coaches, and elected officials comprise the interview list. Several interviewees represented organizations and groups that have taken a leadership role in the Eggerss renovation or Save the Stadium activity, while others are among Van Wert's most well respected civic supporters and generous donors. Several interviews involved more than one representative for a company or organization.

Anthony Adams
Stacy Adam
Dr. Becca Adams
Stacey Baer
Seth Baker
Judge Marty Burchfield
Dale Butler
Gary Clay
R.J. Coleman
Andy Czajkowski
Denise Frey
Mark Fuerst
Robert Gamble
Rob Gamble
Andy Gearhart
Brad Greve
Brian Greve
Michelle Gunter
Cindy Hurless
Dr. Jake Jones
Chuck Koch
Eric McCracken
Kent McMillen
Larry Mengerink
Scott Niswonger
Mitch Price
Bill Purmort
Keith Recker
Brian Renner
Jim Robedeau
Pat Ryan
Julie Schaufelberger
Mark Schumm
Trent Temple
Leah Treece
Mark Verville
Charlie Witten

INTERVIEWEE ATTITUDES ABOUT THE PROPOSED PROJECT

Not surprisingly, interviewees were almost evenly divided in their opinions about the viability of a fundraising campaign to renovate Eggerss Stadium. Proponents of saving the stadium were more passionate in their support than those opposed, whose views leaned more toward the practical and pragmatic aspects of the project and proposed campaign. Those on both sides of the issue stated their awareness of the challenges involved in such an undertaking, especially the funding aspect.

Positive opinions

Those favoring spending money to renovate Eggerss Stadium as proposed typically cited reasons that fell into the following categories:

1. Personal experiences related to attending games at Eggerss Stadium
2. The stadium's proximity and importance to the downtown core
3. Preservation of historic structures that give Van Wert character and enhance its livability

Typical positive/supportive comments

- "There's just nothing like being at a football game on a Friday night in that old stadium. The lights of downtown, the sound of the band beneath the stands, the wall-- all are part of what makes Van Wert's football games special, no matter what kind of season we're having."

- "My kids still play there, and as a parent, I know how much they love the experience, despite the poor conditions."

- "Moving football or tearing down the stadium would be one more blow to a downtown that's already struggling for relevance."

- "If it's not renovated and maintained we will have lost a true landmark, and then what will we have? A big vacant space in an important part of downtown that could be an even bigger eyesore for a long time."

- "I'm not originally from Van Wert, but I've lived places where they tore down their iconic landmarks and regretted it. This old stadium should be saved."

- "It gets a lot more usage than some people realize—varsity, JV, freshmen, and powder puff games add up to more than 30 events there."

- "I just hate the idea of sitting out in the open at the new school in the middle of a wind-blown field on freezing metal stands."

- "With some creative thinking and support from the athletic department, Eggerss can be saved and become a more active, contributing part of downtown revitalization, especially if it's included in the new downtown master plan."

- "A lot of communities would give anything to have a sports facility located in close proximity to their commercial centers. We are being short sighted on how to best utilize this old stadium."

Non supportive attitudes

The comments from those believing the Eggerss renovation is ill advised fell into these general categories:

1. Skepticism about the costs estimates for the project
2. Belief that a bond issue and school funding should pay for the project
3. Preference for consolidating athletic facilities at the high school

Typical comments not supportive of the Eggerss renovation

- *"Putting more money into that relic makes no sense. It will only continue to deteriorate and become more of a liability to the board and a drain on the district's resources."*

- *"Build a new state of the art stadium at the school with a bond issue. Just imagine what could be built with $4 million, and everyone would share in the cost, not just a handful of donors."*

- *"I don't have a lot of confidence in the estimated costs of renovation. Seems like there must be a lot of fluff in the numbers."*

- *"I get the tradition part, but all traditions start somewhere at some point. A nice stadium at the high school will develop its own traditions as new teams come along."*

- *"Our kids deserve a good, modern sports complex that's convenient to their school."*

- *"In addition to being inadequate, the stadium is not particularly nice to look at, and it wasn't designed with any architectural significance. It was a depression era WPA project and it has outlived its useful life."*

- *"Sell the land and use the proceeds to build a really nice stadium out at the school."*

INTERVIEWEE OPINIONS ABOUT THE PROPOSED SPORTS COMPLEX

The document that described the proposed renovation of Eggerss Stadium also contained an outline of a "state of the sport" athletic complex at Van Wert High School. The anticipated cost of the complex was $3.2 million. All sports except football would utilize these facilities if Eggerss Stadium remains the venue for football.

Not surprisingly, interviewees' focus was primarily on the Eggerss renovation, especially those who are most passionate about Cougar football remaining at Eggerss. These individuals are not opposed to the proposed sports complex, but based on their responses would likely not support new baseball and soccer fields at the expense of abandoning Eggerss Stadium. One interviewee characterized a complex at the high school as "*. . . likely to be bland, featureless and very cold when sitting in unprotected bleachers for games.*"

However, among those who favored abandoning Eggerss and building afresh at the high school the concept was well received. In fact, those who would normally be considered among Van Wert's most generous donors almost universally preferred consolidating athletic facilities, including football, at the high school.

A few questioned the estimated cost of the proposed athletic complex, saying it appeared excessively high. Virtually all of those favoring spending for any type of athletic facilities said they favored a bond issue to provide the major part of the funding that would be required.

INTERVIEWEE ATTITUDES ABOUT RAISING $4.3 MILLION

Interviewees were asked if they believed a community-wide fundraising campaign for $4.3 million would be successful. Opinions ranged from *cautiously optimistic* to *wholly pessimistic*.

The optimistic respondents cited the strong support demonstrated in the 2017 citizen survey, the stadium's well loved history, and the enthusiasm of the community's support of Cougar football. Some suggested that former Van Wert football players and alumnae would surely provide major gifts, and others were confident that grass roots fundraising activities by the Boosters and the Recking Crew would yield large amounts.

Those less optimistic most often said $4.3 million was too large for a community wide funding campaign for a cause that should be funded by a bond issue. Others were simply lukewarm on the issue for a variety of reasons and said they did not think the community, especially its major donors, would rally to this cause as they had for other Van Wert capital campaigns.

Typical comments

- "If the Boosters and the Recking Crew get solidly behind this I think it could be successful."
- "I just think it's just too heavy a lift for Van Wert right now."
- "Traditional donor support will be dampened by the fact that a bond issue is really the best route for this project."
- "If there is divided opinion about whether to build a new stadium at the school or save Eggerss, that in itself will doom fundraising, especially for a goal as big as this one."
- "I believe if the downtown backers get behind the Eggerss project, that will elevate its fundraising chances a lot."

INTERVIEWEE INDICATIONS OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Regardless of the passion and enthusiasm for any project, the ultimate test of funding viability rests on the indications of likely financial support provided by those interviewed. In these confidential interviews, respondents were candid

and forthcoming regarding their financial capacity and intentions regarding the projected $4.3 million need.

A "Gift Range Table" ($4.3 million pro forma) was shared with each interviewee. Each was asked to indicate a possible range of financial support they would deem possible if a campaign were launched to fund the renovation of Eggerss Stadium. Indications ranged from a number of emphatically stated " . . .zero!" to a figure of $500,000 that came with stipulations.

Of the organizations or individuals responding, 13 said they would not consider making a gift to underwrite the project. Another 14 mentioned specific dollar amounts or ranges they would consider, and 7 represented organizations or individuals not expected to be approached for a gift.

Typical comments

- "My company probably won't give anything for this, but my spouse and I would consider giving $5,000 personally."
- "We are not excited about the project and won't be giving anything."
- "I believe the Boosters and Recking Crew could raise at least $100,000."
- "I would give to save Eggerss, but would also put in some money if they need it to build out the athletic complex at the school."
- "Do the math on a bond issue and it is very feasible. A fundraising campaign is not the way to go, so I won't recommend a charitable contribution of any amount to my board."
- "This should be a well supported and successful campaign, and my company will put in at least $25,000 and we may be able to go up to $50,000."
- "Because there are three schools in our service area, we divide our support equally among them, and our gift would not be more than a few thousand at best."
- "If the citizens won't support a bond issue for this cause, why would my company give money to fix up this deteriorating old stadium?"
- "When I'm convinced the cost estimates are accurate and realistic, we might consider giving something, but it wouldn't be a large amount."

- "We'll do our part financially."

- "There are too many campaigns going on or getting ready to raise funds and we will have to support those. Unfortunately, this one is a low priority for us."

- "We'll consider a strong commitment, but only if it's part of the downtown renovation plan that's being put together now. The stadium and surrounding area can have a really positive impact on downtown."

NCDS RECOMMENDATIONS

Feasible fundraising goal

The trajectory set by the indications expressed, coupled with the experience of NCDS in projecting feasible fundraising goals suggests that, optimistically, a goal in the range of $1.3 million would be attainable if a campaign were launched in the next year.

It must be noted, however, that those who said they would be willing to make the most significant and essential gifts stipulated that their support would be contingent upon:

(1.) Successful passage of a bond issue for an amount that assures completion of the project when augmented by the funds from a campaign, and;

(2.) Eggerss Stadium gaining inclusion into the downtown master plan, with a vision of becoming more widely utilized as a civic asset.

Critical fundraising issues

- Van Wert's traditionally most generous donors, especially those in the business community, are skeptical of the wisdom of renovating a decaying civic asset rather than spending money on new and more easily maintained facilities. They generally prefer consolidating all athletic facilities at the high school.

- Fundraising efforts would need to overcome the narrowness of the appeal for football, and the narrowness of the appeal for a Van Wert City school property among other schools in the county. The donor prospect pool will also likely be limited to Van Wert.

- Skepticism relating to the cost projections for refurbishing Eggerss Stadium must be addressed. Some significant donors believe the figures are higher than necessary. In addition, a clear plan for ongoing maintenance must be part of any case for support.

- Enlisting enthusiastic and financially committed champions of a fundraising campaign will be critical. Some of Van Wert's most capable and experienced campaign leaders have indicated that they will not take on this initiative.

- The leaders and constituencies of both the Boosters and the Recking Crew would need to work together to support fundraising, including helping gain passage of a bond issue if that option is pursued.

Campaign recommendation

Two factors weigh heavily on recommending that no campaign be launched for this project.

1. The Board of Education has consistently said it would be unwise to burden the school system with a bond issue, and they are currently unwilling to take that action. However, without the revenue from a bond issue, community fundraising will fall far short of the amount needed to complete the envisioned renovations. Further, without the bond issue a number of major prospective supporters will be unwilling to participate financially, and a few may even oppose a campaign. Adding to this obstacle, some influential prospective donors prefer selling the stadium and its land, and using those proceeds to build a new stadium at the high school.

2. Significant potential support is contingent on the stadium becoming part of the downtown renovation plan. Those close to the creation of the downtown plan have indicated that Eggerss Stadium is not included in the plan, and is not likely to be considered for inclusion. If an expanded utilization strategy were envisioned for Eggerss, and it made its way into the plan, raising at least $1.3 million would be feasible, and a campaign for that amount could be launched.

The potential for maximizing Eggerss Stadium as a civic asset

Conversations with interviewees often shifted to discussing how Eggerss Stadium might be adapted for broader utilization by the community. A few candidly said they believed the Van Wert High Athletic Department would oppose any use other than football, citing turf destruction and loss of control of the facility. Others offered very creative and interesting uses for Eggerss and its surrounding spaces as they searched for ways to save the stadium. Several interviewees suggested that artificial turf could be a worthwhile addition to the stadium, especially for additional uses. Among the ideas mentioned were the following:

- Outdoor entertainments unsuitable for the PAC
- Community events and celebrations, especially those aligned with downtown
- Seasonal farmers markets, arts & craft fairs, and related events
- Farm equipment sales expos
- Renaissance Fair
- Marching band competitions
- Reconfigure stadium seating to offer "sky box" areas for summer park concerts
- Open air ice skating with portable rink

CONCLUSION

Interviewees frequently commented positively on the Board of Education's diligence and participative approach to dealing with the question of athletic facilities. A great deal of time has passed since the 2017 "vote" on the athletic facility options, and even since the interviews comprising the input for this report were conducted a pandemic has gripped the world, making economic predictions even more uncertain.

Providing a first class education for Van Wert's students has always been the Board's first priority. Now, uncertainty about safely restarting on-campus classes in the fall will likely overshadow the issue of Eggerss refurbishment, and the future of the 2021 Cougar football season will also be a major concern.

Nonetheless, citizen interest in the future of Eggerss Stadium was high prior to commencing the feasibility study, and those interviewed were still genuinely concerned about a decision being made by the Board. They were candid and forthcoming in their opinions and views, as well as in their indications of likely

financial support. Unfortunately, those indications do not point to a successful campaign for $4.3 million despite the evident enthusiasm and optimism of many of these opinion leaders.

Special thanks are offered to Anthony Adams for his diligent and very successful work in scheduling all of the interviews for this study. Additional appreciation goes to each interviewee who took the time for a productive meeting in which they expressed thoughtful and insightful opinions. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations in this report will assist the Board of Education in charting a way forward that is most beneficial to the athletes and teams involved, as well as to the parents and citizens of Van Wert.