

The End of An Era - A New School For Valdez



An aerial view drawing of the exterior of the new school. Image courtesy Bettisworth North Architects and Planners

By Rod Morrison

Since 2002, the City of Valdez has been planning stages to build a new middle school to replace the old building that was constructed in 1965. On October 2, 2012, the City of Valdez passed a bond issue to build a new middle school.

The new school project was approved by the State of Alaska which qualifies Valdez to get 60 percent reimbursement on the new school. The new middle school will provide a unique and transitional learning environment which meets the needs of current and future students in Valdez.

Many of the students, staff and community members took part in the design meetings for the new school. Their participation was vital to the process of designing a new facility that will serve our community for years to come.

The committee looked closely at safety and security when planning the school. The new facility takes into consideration many things that were problems in the current school, including traffic flow, lighting, parking issues, snow storage, sustainability, shared cost of facility maintenance, disaster and emergency use, and the facility site will enhance parking and circulation, and promotes energy conservation.

In Valdez, community/school partnerships have played an increasing role in public school facilities. "Best Practices" suggest that facilities should serve not only as instructional centers for students, but also as user-friendly centers of the community.

The new George H Gilson Middle School (MS) will provide programs and access to resources for adults, businesses, and

other community organizations. These partnerships provide students with expanded learning opportunities, professional development opportunities for staff, and a venue for various community activities.

Many community interests were taken into consideration in the planning of the new middle school. Various activities such as wrestling, archery, rock climbing wall, community theatre, culture camps, dance, summer fun adventure camps, intramurals and a city emergency shelter are all planned for the new facility.

Currently MS students and staff have relocated to Hermon Hutchens Elementary School (HHES) where the conditions will be crowded until the new middle school is complete. Through some creative scheduling, the middle school will share the building with HHES staff and students.

The goal is to keep the middle school staff and students as separate from elementary students and staff as possible. The District will try to run a "school" within a school. For example, the curtain will be dropped center court of the gym utilizing half as the MS gym and half as elementary. Lunches will be served on separate schedules and there will be separate office space for the middle school staff.

For the next year and a half, all of the MS athletic practices and games will be held in the HHES gym.

On May 24, 2013, after the 8th grade promotion, a new middle school ground breaking celebration was held. It was both a day of celebration and sadness as Valdez honored the past and



prepares for the future.

Some traditions established here will be continued such as the Old Town Valdez Project that was designed to have students always remember that dreadful day in 1964 that impacted our community in such a dramatic way. Mr. Bob Felland, a former geologist, and the Valdez Museum worked with teachers at George H Gilson Junior High School to develop a thematic unit focused on teaching students about Valdez history.

In 1964, the Valdez Junior/Senior High School was in Old Town Valdez, which had originally been built in 1959, and it was damaged by the earthquake of 1964. Valdez was selected as an “All-American City” in recognition of re-building efforts in 1965. This was the first time in the U.S. history that an entire town was moved to a new location.

Gloria McAllister, who remembers her father’s involvement in the City Council planning sessions for the development of the new town, said the Army Corps of Engineers needed a plan for the Junior/Senior high school right away.

The Valdez City Council decided to use the plans for the former Jr/Sr. high school since this school had been constructed recently in 1959. The new school was the same design as the one in Old Town, but it was a mirror image of the old school.

In 1977, the school was renamed the George Gilson Junior High after the current Valdez High School was completed. For 35 years, this building held the name of George H Gilson Junior High School and has been held in high regard by the City of

Top, Gilson Junior High School Alumni gather for a photo in front of the soon to be demolished school after the groundbreaking celebration. Above, Members of the Gilson family and City and School Officials digging dirt at the Middle School groundbreaking celebration.

Photos courtesy Rod Morrison, Valdez City School District

Top Left, artists rendering of the canopy, or covered walkway, at the new school.

Image courtesy Bettisworth North Architects and Planners

Valdez.

For many Valdez community members, it is important to remember the past, so parts of the old building will be incorporated into the new school.

Pieces of the current gym floor including the *Husky mascot* and the slogan *Home of the Huskies*, will be incorporated in the design of the new building. The dedication plaque that currently is hanging in the hallway that honors George H Gilson’s efforts and hard work for this community will also be displayed in the new school.

The new school project is set to be completed in December 2014.

Remember the school motto at Gilson Middle School
SUCCESS IS THE ONLY OPTION! ■