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Connecting the past to the present



The St. Helens High School cafeteria will become a significantly larger common area. Acoustic baffles on the ceiling will be different shades of blue to suggest flowing water. (courtesy of Soderstrom Architects)

BY ALEX JENSEN

The main high school in St. Helens, around 35 miles northwest of Portland, consists of four separate buildings built in the 1950s and '80s – but not for much longer. A large-scale renovation is planned to connect three of the buildings and modernize all four.

Soderstrom Architects is designing the school improvements, which are being paid for with money from a \$55 million bond approved by voters last year. Hoffman Construction is the general contractor for the project.

Roughly 12,000 square feet will be added to fill in gaps between three of the school buildings. That new space will hold additional classrooms and administrative offices, and allow enrollment to increase from 850 students to around 1,300.

St. Helens High School sits along Gable Road in a linear arrangement, with covered exterior walkways. The design calls for a single, loaded corridor to run through the buildings in order to unite them. Usually when people think of corridors, they're not a special place, Soderstrom Architects Associate Andy Bonesz said. But this one will be twice the size of an ordinary one, he added, and become the backbone of the whole school. One difficulty, Soderstrom Associate Meagan Baker said, is the site's slope. From Building A to Building B, for example, there is a 12-foot height difference. The challenge, she explained, is ensuring there is a flat surface for doors to open onto. Ramps are being incorporated for areas where there are significant changes in elevation.

"We didn't want it to make it feel like this narrow passageway and wanted it to make it feel like a big room, Bonesz said.

The corridor, he added, will not only be a way of passage but also a place for students to hang out.

The school's interior will also be modernized. The three connected buildings, Baker said, will be divided into three different sections based on the surrounding natural resources: water, forest and basalt.

Building A, which houses most of the public spaces – the cafeteria, gyms and auditorium – will have a water theme. The cafeteria's ceiling, for instance, will feature shades of blues on the acoustic baffles to resemble water flowing.

Then in Building B the theme will transition into a clean, crisp landscape representing a rock quarry. The neutral landscape and color palette will be used for computer science and art classrooms.

Building C holds most of the classrooms and the me-

dia center. Its "tree of knowledge" is meant to indicate where the school is rooted. Most of the material in the space will either be wood or look like it. The focal point will be a 16-column circular array with skylights – a design intended to resemble a tree canopy.

Building D, where shop classes take place, will remain separate so students and teachers have more room outside to work on projects. But that building will be updated as well.

The design team is weighing options for ceiling heights in some spaces, including the media center, Bonesz said, to potentially create a warmer and more intimate feel.

"Tall ceilings are good for feeling grand, but you can get lost in them," he said.

For the interior, Baker and Bonesz said they're looking to use materials that are durable, require low maintenance and are cost-effective.

The additional sections' exteriors will have a brick skin that matches the existing buildings.

The team is about 75 percent done with design development, according to Baker. The plan is for builders to break ground in late summer or early fall, she said.

Construction is expected to require approximately two years. At this point, work will take place even if students and staffers occupy the building this fall.



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A single corridor – approximately twice the size of one in a typical school – will run through currently separate buildings that will be connected into one. (courtesy of Soderstrom Architects)