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The purpose of this paper is to be beneficial to the community it serves in every way possible.

## Fruitport's New High School

by Larry J Pellet



The grand entrance as seen from the second floor

It's the dawning of a new day for the Fruitport School District, as a crowd upwards to 400 gathered for the ribbon cutting ceremony Sept 29th of a grandiose new high school, commemorating what may possibly be most crowning achievement of our district in this lifetime, rivaling the historic Fruitport Hotel from the 1870's in all it's majesty. On hand to witness the splendor were various news agencies, Senator Jon Bumstead, newly elected Superintendent Jason Kennedy as well as the previous, Bob Szymoniak, while the throng was ushered in and greeted by who else - the athletic body and the student band - accompanied by a glorious rendition of the Trojan's cherished fight song.

Perhaps most moving however, was the strong showing by retired teachers, members of the Fruitport Education Foundation, upcoming students and alumni, and those who have spanned the years and carried the transition from the old to the new, reveling in the glory of the present, and basking at the marvel of what a community -largely grassroots and indicative of the efforts of the younger generation- can do once they unite for a larger purpose than themselves.

"I am speechless", exclaimed former teacher Joyce Vanderstelt. "We deserved this a long time ago...the kids deserved it!"



Joyce Vanderstelt, upcoming 8th grade student Hosanna Anderson, Eric Anderson

At a price tag of nearly \$50 million dollars, approved by voters in 2016, and 3 years into the building stage, the high school was "designed with intent", according to Kennedy. Emphasis was placed on STEM, an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, while the layout of the structure, designed by TowerPinkster, focused on safety, fiscal responsibility, modern technology and an effort to make the building the "flagship of the district". Jeff Grossenbacher, Director of Technology, dubs the new auditorium (with a seating capacity of 800 vs. 300 of the old

auditorium) not only that, but a "Performing Arts Center", a "crowning jewel", one that is arguably the showpiece of West Michigan... and available for rent.

Equipped with a glassed in, monstrous computer server that functions for the entire



Robotics department

district in which all school buildings are connected by fiber optics, a state of the art robotics dept., backup generator, numerous gymnasiums, a fireplace in the cafeteria with glass walls overlooking the sports field, elevators, and a spacious front entrance which allows access to all junctions within a space of 60-70 seconds, the new facility employs 21st century innovation with a college-like atmosphere.



Performing Arts Center

Largely undeterred through Covid, the "timeline in which it was built" was what Director of Operations John Winkas was most proud of. The 1987 Fruitport grad says much of the steel was pre-bought, a fact which comes into play considering "beams purchased today would take a year and a half to get here".

"The building holds 850 students currently", added longtime principal, teacher and 1990 alumni Lauren Chesney, "with the



Rob Rogers, Jason Kennedy, John Winkas, Lauren Chesney, Dave Hazekamp, Bob Szymoniak

ability to add on".

Bystanders of the event remarked on the fresh smell, with one wittingly joking that it "outta smell like money". Kevin Anderson, 1983 Fruitport grad quipped "I almost want to come back to school".

Interestingly enough, the 2016 millage, which allows for future renovation (probably Edgewood Elementary) without raising additional levies, was passed by a margin of less than 200 votes, after efforts failed previously in 2009. "It was a an effort by the younger, elementary parent groups who envisioned a new structure for their kids...knocking on doors and attending community events that put it over the top", stated Chesney.

Dave Hazekamp, school board president, reflected back upon those who initially opposed the millage and lavish spending on



2017 grad Kelsie Schultz, elementary teacher Danielle McConnell

a new building. "Those people eventually stuck with us", he said. "I had one guy come up to me who said, 'We don't need a Cadillac, it can be a Buick'", he noted, in regard to the design.

The previous high school was erected in 1954, and survived to be one of the oldest this side of the state. With the arrival of the new, along comes a solid beginning. "It's a lot of steel and mortar", observed Winkas, "not a lot of fluff".

A fine Buick indeed.



Cafeteria

High school substitute teacher Eric Anderson chided, "I am confused as to how we got something this great in Fruitport", while elementary teacher Danielle McConnell added "it was much needed...it will get people excited".

And that it has. What's left now is up to the teachers, the administrators and the School Board - cognizant stewards of their place in history - to continue the dream, to carry the torch of accountability granted them by the taxpayers, and to keep the grand-old rich tradition that began with peaches, Crawville and Furnace Town alive and well to it's progeny.