

Santiam Canyon district turns a \$17.9 million bond into a \$26 million project

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Alex Mitchell never thought the day would come when he would want to come to school.

After almost a year of learning entirely in front of a computer screen, he was ready to come back to Santiam High School to complete his senior year.

“Sitting behind a computer all day wasn’t working,” Mitchell said.

What Mitchell experienced in February when he returned to the school for the first time in more than a year was more than he, and the voters who approved paying \$17.9 million for new buildings and renovations to the schools, expected.

Santiam High School and Santiam Middle School had been replaced with 41,000 square feet of new buildings holding 21 classrooms – a significant increase from the proposed 15 classrooms in 27,000 square feet, new offices and conference rooms, a remodeled cafeteria in the elementary school and expanded parking lots that total about \$26 million.

And then there is the show stopper.

What was proposed in the bond as a simple auxiliary gym for things like JV basketball games and PE classes is becoming a massive showpiece thanks to donations from local timber companies like Freres Lumber Company.

“It wasn’t like we had to pay for the Taj Mahal to get the Taj Mahal,” Santiam Canyon superintendent Todd Miller said. “We just had to have a great partner with a really innovative product, which when you see it, you’ll realize why this thing is a showstopper.”

Bonds difficult to pass in Santiam Canyon

The bonds for the school project, which voters approved in 2019, were the first ever passed in the district.



The new auxiliary gym being built partly with bond money at Santiam High School in Mill City, Oregon on Friday, April 16, 2021. — BRIAN HAYES | STATESMAN JOURNAL

The former building that housed the school was built in 1969 and had outlived its usefulness.

“You’d be walking in school and there’s a garbage can in the hallway because the ... roof’s leaking or something,” said Gaven Lyon, a junior at Santiam High School.

Prior to the 1990s, the district had been well funded because tax dollars from timber sales remained in the school districts where the sales took place. But then that was changed through a series of laws, and now the district receives money on a per-student basis like all Oregon schools.

“Our elementary school, which was built in the ‘80s, was just paid for,” Miller said.

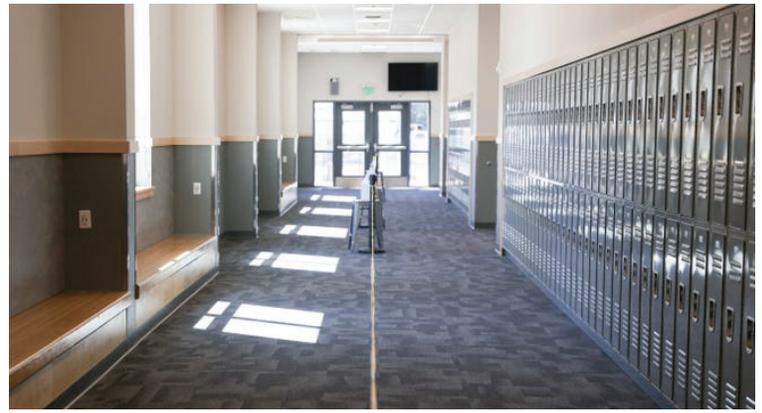
Voters in the district, which includes cities like Mill City, Gates, Detroit and Idanha and spans Marion and Linn counties, passed the bond by a 52% to 47% margin.

Local companies including Freres Lumber campaigned for the bond, despite their products not being included in the original plans.

“The timber industry is still a viable way to support the local infrastructure that we have in order to encourage the rural communities,” said Tyler Freres, vice president for sales for Freres Lumber Company.



A new classroom in one of the new school buildings built with bond money and other assistance at Santiam High School in Mill City, Oregon on Friday, April 16, 2021. — BRIAN HAYES | STATESMAN JOURNAL



One of the new school buildings built with bond money and other assistance at Santiam High School in Mill City, Oregon on Friday, April 16, 2021. — BRIAN HAYES | STATESMAN JOURNAL

“And frankly, I think the rural communities have been getting the short end of the stick for a very long time and I would like to see a structure like this as something this community can meet in, can walk in and be proud of.”

The bond voters approved in 2019 was for \$17.9 million, but the district leveraged those funds with a series of grants and donations to expand it to a \$26 million project.

The largest share of that increase came from state grants, including \$4 million from a program that matches funds with approved school bonds projects.

“So by the community doing what they did, we’ve been able to leverage a bunch of more money from other sources to enhance this project,” Miller said. “What’s neat is our community is paying their portion, but they’re getting so much more from it.”

One of the classrooms that was originally intended to be a regular room was turned into a fully-outfitted culinary lab with a grant for about \$140,000, and the district recently received another grant to purchase a food truck. That will allow the school to start a culinary program.

Wildfires delay return

The goal of the bond was to have construction on the new classrooms completed for the start of the 2020-2021 school year.

But the buildings were not completed when the Beachie Creek Fire tore through the area on Sept. 8 due to delays in construction — though it wouldn’t have mattered as schools were unable to have in-person instruction due to COVID-19.

The new buildings weren’t damaged directly by the fire, but they sustained smoke damage that required significant cleaning.



Building C at Santiam High School in Mill City, Oregon on Friday, April 16, 2021. — BRIAN HAYES | STATESMAN JOURNAL

That wasn’t covered by district’s insurance policy.

“The fire did not originate from our campus, therefore it’s not our fire, it’s not our smoke, it is not covered. So that then delayed getting our buildings clean a lot longer because we’re looking at almost \$1 million in smoke damage,” Miller said. “We couldn’t just out of pocket do this.”

The district worked with legislators and in an emergency session was approved for a loan from the state to have the buildings restored, including cleaning and work on the HVAC system.

The district is getting payments from FEMA to recover some of those costs.

Gym grows with support from local companies

The original plan for the auxiliary gym was an unremarkable metal gym large enough for a basketball court and a few rows of bleachers, much like those that exist at many small schools.

What is expected to be completed by summer is a massive, wood structure that fits the aesthetic of the community and its history as a logging town.

Freres has been manufacturing its Mass Ply Paneling – which is used as a structural element rather than only as paneling – at its new plant in Lyons since 2017.

The Mass Ply Paneling has been used in a few large structures, including the Peavy Hall and construction of the Advanced Wood Products Laboratory at Oregon State University, but none in Freres’ backyard.

Much of the wood in the new gym, including interior and exterior walls, roofing and support beams, has been made of the material.

To achieve the 72-foot span for the length of the roof — MPP can be made only in 48-foot beams — they engineered knife-plate connections with steel embedded in the wood.

Most of the interior walls and supports are bare wood and will remain that way.

The auxiliary gym has its own foyer, gender-neutral bathrooms, storage rooms and team rooms.

“I think the final amount, we contributed a quarter of a million dollars toward this gymnasium, which I believe we covered about 85% of our cost within this overall project,” Freres said. “That was part of our commitment to make sure that this was a building that was unique.”

Freres also provided wood for benches in the hallways of the school buildings and some beams for those buildings, too.

Frank Lumber, based in Mill City, also donated some of the materials used in the project.

Most of the gym on the Mill City campus was prefabricated and the main structure, which was engineered by ZCS Engineering and built by Gerding Builders, was assembled in two weeks.

Like so much of the renovations, the school district ended up with more than it planned.

“Freres contributed a lot in donations to make this happen, and it’s innovative and it’s unique,” Miller said. “When people step foot in this thing, it’s like they’ve never seen anything like it.

“It’s not like we were purposefully going out for something extravagant, it just ended up that way because of the partnerships and the cool outcome.”

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Freres wood products are used as structural elements and aesthetic elements in the new gym at Santiam High School in Mill City, Oregon on Friday, April 16, 2021. — BRIAN HAYES | STATESMAN JOURNAL



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