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A Thoughtful Planning Process

Nearly two years ago, United South Central began a conversation as enrollment continued to grow and space in our school became increasingly limited. We knew we needed to look ahead and determine how our district could best respond.

As a School Board member, I believe our responsibility when considering a significant investment in facilities goes beyond finding a solution to an immediate challenge. We need to understand the current needs, consider what our students and staff will need in the future, evaluate our options, and listen carefully to the communities we serve. That is why the planning process behind this recommendation has been so important to me.

This process did not begin with a proposed project or a decision about what should be built. It began with questions. What was driving our space needs? What options did we have? And how could we make sure the path forward reflected the needs and priorities of the communities we serve?

In January 2025, the district formed a task force made up of community members, staff, and district representatives. The group began by learning more about enrollment and space needs, touring the school to see how space was being used, and discussing the challenges created by continued growth. Over several meetings, members considered six concepts ranging from making different use of existing space to larger additions.

That work gave us a starting point, but it also showed us where we needed more information. The district brought in outside expertise to conduct facility condition, educational adequacy, and demographic and enrollment assessments. Specialists evaluated the condition of the building and its systems, while the educational adequacy process looked at how well our spaces support teaching and learning.

Input was an important part of that work. Students, teachers, staff, and administrators completed detailed surveys and then participated in meetings to review the findings, identify and prioritize needs, and provide additional context. Separate conversations were held with elementary and high school groups, along with other stakeholders, such as kitchen and maintenance staff and administrators.

With that information in hand, the Community Task Force reconvened, expanding the original group to bring additional community voices into the process. Representatives from across USC's six communities reviewed the assessment findings and considered potential solutions. Three options emerged for further consideration. Importantly, the district did not simply choose one and move forward. Those options were shared with the community for feedback before a recommendation was developed.

That feedback helped shape what came next. The district conducted a scientific community survey to gather broader input and continued listening to residents. Based on that feedback, the plan and its cost were modified to better reflect what we were hearing from our community.

That progression matters.

A thoughtful planning process does not mean starting with an answer and finding ways to support it. It means starting with a need, gathering information, considering alternatives, listening to the people affected by the decision, and being willing to make changes when that input points to a better path.

United South Central is made up of six communities, and each one is an important part of who we are. Our goal throughout this process has been to make sure this was not simply a school district planning process, but a community planning process.

The recommendation voters will consider this November is the result of nearly two years of study, discussion, evaluation, and community input. It was not developed overnight, and it was not developed in isolation. We started with questions, not answers. We gathered information, considered options, listened to our communities, and adjusted the plan based on what we heard. That is what a thoughtful process should look like, and I am proud of the care that has gone into getting us here.

Mike Schrader
School Board Chair, United South Central Public Schools