continued from page 1

Committee (LRFPC), comprised of community members, school board representatives, staff and administration, built a comprehensive renovation and expansion plan to improve safety, modernize the facilities and attract and retain students.

The most significant upgrades and renovations of the plan include: a new 400-seat auditorium with an adjacent art room, construction of a new middle school gym, a redesigned cafeteria, patio and courtyard; updated STEM [Science, technology, engineering and mathematicsl labs with open collaborative learning spaces; expanded visitor parking with a revitalized main entrance; an updated and restored library and new floors, roofs, bathrooms and locker rooms

LeVau and Mitchell reiterated throughout the meeting that they believe these potential renovations could be advantageous to students' success beyond school.

"The technological advances in the past 30 years necessitate us building larger STEM labs, building more up-to-date STEM labs so that it creates a better learning environment," said Mitchell. "The job of high school is not necessarily always to get kids ready to go to college, it's to get kids ready for the world."

BFA Fairfax High School Principal John Tague expressed his desire to attract more students who have been leaving for other high schools like Essex and South Burlington High School from BFA, Fletcher and Georgia. "We would love to attract more of the Georgia students to come here into an updated, modern facility," he said. "We have excellent drama programs and sports programs. But when they come into the building, it's not evident.'

"We believe that this is the building we need for the next 20-25 years," added LeVau. "We do feel strongly that if we don't do some of these renovations that we will continue to lose students.

Alice Scannell, a parent of two BFA elementary school children, acknowledged that word of the project has begun to add positivity about BFA Fairfax in conversations around town. "...a lot of parents are starting to feel like, Wait, no, this looks really exciting - the technology, the different labs, more investment in different arts programs - it's definitely

changing the conversation in my



Photos courtesy of Franklin West Supervisory Union Sketches by Black River Design show what BFA Fairfax would look like after a proposed \$16 million renovation.

circles around the future of our elementary kids right now.

Likewise, 10-year Fairfax resident Katherine Boyd said making this investment now could pay off for Fairfax's future.

"If we educate our children in our town, they might go off and get a degree somewhere," she said. "But then they might come back with their families into Fairfax and bring their children. It's the future, isn't it? So we are moving along with the times.'

Tague and Mitchell also announced that 23 new programs will be offered for this coming academic year as a result of feedback from students and teachers on what they want to learn and teach. These new programs, they said, would benefit from updated facilities and technology to accompany them.

Additional classrooms and common rooms are proposed for the school's second floor for middle and high schoolers along with a new 1.760 square-foot band room.

The potential costs and tax implications of the project generated some tension within the room as community members pondered how the "wants" versus the "needs" of the proposal.

For example, several community members questioned the need for skylights proposed for various classrooms - which are negotiable - but acknowledged the need for updated innovation and science labs and new bathroom renovations.

The "BFA Fairfax Renovation" website projects the long-term costs of the \$16 million project to include an interest rate between 3-4 percent.

Taxes would increase, though, Vermont pays for its K-12 schools through a "common statewide system" that uses education taxes to make bond payments on proposed school projects such as BFA Fairfax's, just as Fairfax would pay for one in Burlington.

The tax impact would be felt through the addition of bond payments to the school budget, which could, in turn, increase the cost per pupil. Tax rates in Vermont are based on per pupil costs.



BFA Fairfax school board members Rachelle LeVau and Scott Mitchell discuss the potential renovations during last Thursday's public meeting at the school. Behind them is school board member Kathy Muehl.

However, should the renovation attract more tuition paying students, the increase in revenue would help to keep tax increases down.

LeVau cited Vermont's income sensitivity provisions as a relief for people with fixed or combined incomes below \$141,000. Through these provisions, Qualified taxpayers would be eligible for a property tax adjustment and "assessed at a lower rate" even if taxes are raised for the project. LeVau estimates that 65 percent of Fairfax households qualify as income sensitive.

The renovation committee also said the renovation would increase the space available for events and the capacity for community involvement.

A new middle school gym, Mitchell insisted, could afford people with a usable space with new seating that could be utilized for the Fairfax community along with scheduled sports events on week and weekend days. New centralized administrative offices would replace the current middle school gym.

Without approval for the bond, both moderators said neither BFA Fairfax nor the LRFPC have a backup plan to improve the school. Residents would still find themselves with higher maintenance bills as necessary work is performed on bathrooms, locker rooms, sprinkler systems and flooring.

"We were losing student population and we had to do something," said LeVau. "Do you know how many times I heard from people, 'Essex is a pretty school, it's a nice school.' That's what we want here."

According to the last United States Census Bureau estimates for July 1, 2016, Fairfax is among the fastest growing towns in Vermont. The town's population has increased 7.5 percent since 2010, a statistic that Mitchell said was an important factor in BFA Fairfax's planning for new renovations.

"Environment does make a difference," said Scannell of the project. "We have a huge number of families who are ready to invest and ready to stay. If we don't invest in the middle and high school, then we will continue to see people [leave the schooll."

The LRFPC and BFA Fairfax plan to run a more comprehensive communication campaign in the coming weeks on social media and around Fairfax ahead of the Oct. 10 vote.

The next meeting will be held on Aug. 19 at 9 a.m. inside BFA Fairfax's middle school gym. For more information on the proposed renovations, visit bfafuture.weebly.com.