NEWS RELEASE

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CITY WANTS TO TURN OLD GYM INTO NEW LIBRARY

Lavaca, AR 2/24/12 – The city of Lavaca has proposed a plan to convert the 72-year-old Measles Gymnasium into a brand new library and museum. Mayor Hugh Hardgrave and Lavaca resident Ron Smith made their presentation to the Lavaca school board Monday night. The mayor says he wants to restore the gym to its former glory days when people flocked to the venue.

“If you wanted a seat, you better get there early because the town would be there,” Mayor Hardgrave told school board members. “Once again it could be the center of our community in a different way.”

The historic gym was constructed in 1940 with Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds. The facility has not been used for competition since 1991 although it has continued to be used for physical education activities on the school campus. Mayor Hardgrave’s plan calls for the building’s exterior to be preserved, while the interior would be gutted and repurposed into a library that would also house the Lavaca Museum. The museum is currently located in an old storefront downtown.

The current library is located in a 19 by 40 room that provides a measly 912 square feet of space. That’s barely enough room for a few shelves of books, a small children’s area, and a tiny closet that houses two computers. The gym is nearly 6,000 square feet. The mayor called the current library facilities “unacceptable”. Currently, the library is only open a half day on Tuesdays; a fact that Mayor Hardgrave hopes to change with a new building. He would like to see it open 5 or 6 days a week.

Hardgrave explained that the city has met with school Superintendent Jared Cleveland, County Judge David Hudson, State Representative Gary Stubblefield, and the county librarian. He says all have expressed their support of the project. The city tasked architect Galen Hunter of Mahg Architecture with drawing up a plan which was displayed at the meeting. It includes two levels; the first is for the library, the second would house the museum.

“It’s a great idea to have the gym repurposed for a different life,” Superintendent Jared Cleveland said. “The state doesn’t want us to use that one [Measels Gym] for children because of some [minor] structural issues. We did the prudent thing and built an auxiliary gym onto the current gym. Now, the city can take that, and it’s got historical value.”
Rough estimates put the cost of the entire construction project at $1 million dollars. Mr. Smith assured the school board that the city would take the responsibility of raising the funds; most likely through a county tax that would include a sunset clause for the construction costs. The remaining portion would continue to fund the library’s operation.

School board members Craig Carter, Ronnie Dean, Tricia May, Perry Newman, and Lorrie Runion asked questions following Hardgrave and Smith’s thorough presentation and expressed collective support.

“We’re on board as far as we can get on board within the law,” school board president Perry Newman told the mayor. However, Newman and other members expressed the desire for further details, including a plan of operation and detailed expenses, before making their final decision.

The city had initially requested that the school partner with them to staff and operate the new facility. However, Superintendent Cleveland explained that would not be legally possible. Instead, the school would have to deed the building to the city which would then be completely responsible for the project.

Smith, who’s retired from Western Arkansas Planning and Development, admitted that the project will take taxpayer money and support. However, he expressed confidence that the new Lavaca library could be the center of Sebastian County’s regional library system that serves Barling, Mansfield, Hartford, and Greenwood.

One concern raised by Smith was that the Lavaca Youth Basketball League not be affected by the project. The non-profit organization currently uses the old Measles Gym. Superintendent Cleveland reassured him that any potential project would not negatively impact the school’s partnership with the private program. He noted that there are three other gyms on campus that would be available for their use: the elementary gym, the high school gym, and the auxiliary gym.

Although there are no immediate plans to demolish a building that the school and community continue to use, Mayor Hardgrave expressed concern for the historic gymnasium’s future.

“If we see this 1940’s building serve as a library and a museum versus leaving town in the back of a dump truck then we’ve done our job,” Hardgrave told the school board.

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