

NORTH COUNTY NEWS

Hunterdon VoTech District Applying for Grant to Build New Facility at North Hunterdon, Leave Bartles Corner Campus

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HUNTERDON COUNTY, NJ - Hunterdon County Vocational School District Superintendent Todd Bonsall recently explained to the freeholder board an educational and facilities development strategy that would see the county's program leave its Flemington Bartles campus in the future and seek larger space accommodations at North Hunterdon High School.

In the short-term, the Hunterdon County VoTech district, which operates PolyTech Career & Technical School, will be submitting an application for grant funding through the voter approved Securing Our Children's Future Bond Act. The act, approved in the state's 2018 election, provides grants to county vocational-technical school districts and county colleges for the purpose of increasing their physical capacity to prepare students for high-demand, technically skilled careers in key industry sectors.

Initially, \$250 million has been earmarked by the New Jersey Legislature for county career and technical schools, and Bonsall said four large awards of \$40 million each (total \$160 million) and the remaining \$90 million will be divided up toward funding smaller projects that are under \$25 million.

A new career and technical campus at the high school in Annandale is envisioned with a project price tag of \$20 million for a new 35,000-square-foot building. Bonsall said the goal, should a state grant come through, is for the new campus to open in fall 2023, and the current Bartles Corner location for PolyTech programs will close at that point as students' transition.

The County is committed to 25 percent of the project cost, with a not-to-exceed \$5 million mark established should the state's capital grant be awarded.

The PolyTech has a rental agreement for 8 Bartles Corner Road in Flemington, and Bonsall said that leaving this facility will save \$350,000 to \$400,000 in rental fees there per year. PolyTech has its other campuses, one at Hunterdon Central Regional High School and at its ESC Campus in Califon Borough.

Bonsall said the Central facility is owned outright by the VoTech districts, so students and programs there would stay in place despite the new North Hunterdon campus, and some of the programs currently in operation at the Bartles Corner campus would shift to the VoTech Hunterdon Central location with some adjustments and minor site plan

changes to the building and walls, plus “better utilization of space from an efficiency standpoint” planned, he said. There may be three programs from the Bartles campus that are relocated to Central’s campus within the next three years.

The transition to North Hunterdon High School would come at a \$1 cost to the County for a 99-year lease at the campus, as Bonsall noted there is no land acquisition fee associated with this concept of building a brand-new facility.

The New Jersey Department of Education recently provided notice that funds are available from the Career and Technical Education Program Expansion Grants (CTE) for VoTech schools to increase their capacity to offer CTE programs that prepare students for high demand, technically-skilled careers aligned with labor market demands and economic development goals. CTE Expansion grants will award 75 percent of the cost of new construction, renovation and equipment purchases up to a maximum amount of \$40 million with a required county funding match of 25 percent.

Subsequent to Bonsall’s presentation and a lengthy discussion on the positives ahead for the vocational school district and PolyTech, the freeholder board unanimously approved a resolution pledging for Hunterdon County to provide those future project costs.

Bonsall presented the freeholder board with a comprehensive look into the program development and future goals of PolyTech administration in serving the growing Hunterdon County business community and organically contributing to the local workforce, local economy and Hunterdon County’s attractiveness for larger companies and industries to find locations or employ county residents in the years ahead.

“The purpose of the Securing Our Children’s Future Bond Act is to provide capital project grants that access to career and technical education programs,” he said. “In many New Jersey counties, there are students awaiting this that don’t get into their such programs, and this is an opportunity to expand and offer some staple programs that we don’t currently offer here in Hunterdon County, and if current students want those they tend to go across county lines which ends up costing the county money in transportation and more.”

According to Bonsall, the most attractive to the State Education Department in Hunterdon’s forthcoming grant application would be the instructional model and program development initiatives for the new campus.

“It is not being done anywhere else in the state,” he said. “We would be on the same campus with the North Hunterdon-Voorhees sending district and we’d be able to start having ninth grade students attend PolyTech, instead of an 11th grade start under our current shared-time model. Students would be considered full-time vocational school students, and they would be able to expand their career and technical portfolio to be able to take between eight and 10 courses instead of just four (over the two more years).” “And for the academic portion of the program, by building on the North Hunterdon campus, VoTech would not have to build any classrooms to house math, English and science courses and so forth,” he added. “We could just focus the funding on career and

technical programs and the expansion of those programs. And every student would also take two courses in business education and entrepreneurship, and that's not being done anywhere else in New Jersey. The idea is not just to create an employee, but to create future employers. We'd be giving students the basic business knowledge and buildings blocks of how to create and run a successful business."

The VoTech district would subcontract with its campus-mates at North Hunterdon to provide the designated PolyTech students with regular academic instruction.

Bonsall mentioned that there have been preliminary discussions with Hunterdon Central's district administration about potentially copying the campus plan with a new facility and space arrangements, and instructional agreements for Central too, with more designated full-time VoTech students, but he said there may be a period of "wait and see" depending on what happens with the project and state grant application proposed for North Hunterdon's campus.

Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Christopher Phelan expressed the ongoing support of the business community for the mission and education of the VoTech district. He said that the Chamber leadership encourages and respectfully requests the freeholder board to consider the VoTech request and pursuit of capital investment favorably.

"The Chamber Board of Directors, which represents over 600 member organizations comprised of roughly 15,000 full-time employees in Hunterdon County, feel that the county's support for this grant application is an investment in the future expansion of not only the VoTech and PolyTech school programs, but it will pay dividends for all here in the county for years to come," he said. "The Chamber has had a long relationship supporting the Hunterdon Vocational School District as they do a tremendous job in preparing both high school students and adult students for the workforce, earning stackable credentials including certifications, college credits, apprenticeships and various licenses. The support of the county for the VoTech district will give them that opportunity to expand their training opportunities and address their current space limitations. It will also provide greater security and provisions for future academic programs that really meet demands of our employers currently in Hunterdon County and those that locate here in the future."

Freeholder Board Deputy Director Susan Soloway asked how many students are currently enrolled in county VoTech training. Bonsall said at each grade level, starting at ninth grade, there are spaces for 20 students in each of the programs and the planned expansion of five new programs would mean 100 new students per school year would be getting into their career major area "and getting more training than they would have ever gotten in a shared-time model."

Soloway commented on her experiences as a parent of a son who attended Somerset County VoTech because his program of choice was not in the county's PolyTech, and his challenge was the scheduling of the home high school and the VoTech not being in sync.

Soloway also noted the good timing of an investment for the education of high school students already in Hunterdon County as the pandemic could shift post-secondary choices away from four-year programs that cost \$40,000 and more per year and toward technical and trade training.

Bonsall said the Bond Act had been through the state legislature, but was postponed because of the pandemic, and the application period was opened in October with all submissions and documents due by March 1, 2021.

“The New Jersey Department of Education will make their selections and their recommendations to the State Legislature for approval next spring, and districts are expected to be notified in May or June,” he said.

Freeholder Director Shaun C. Van Doren asked Dr. Bonsall what Plan B will be if the state does not award the grant.

Bonsall said a slightly smaller building could be proposed if that were to happen. “I am cautiously optimistic that we have a great, amazing story to tell with this curriculum model that I’ve presented and from what I hear, I think the state is going to love it,” he said.

A former proposal for Hunterdon County VoTech was for a stand-alone \$120 million new facility that would have been required to have a full complement of academic classroom features, but Bonsall said this was not a prudent goal.

Other considerations included an elementary school building that would be closing in one of the towns nearby, but he noted how the corridors, rooms and all furnishings at the school are for small children and not adolescents or young adults. That building, which he didn’t identify by name or town, would have had to be gutted and outfitted with increased power capacity and increased ventilation, driving up the costs.

“That one would not have worked, and it would not be giving our students the opportunity to just walk across the parking lot for academic instruction at the high school, so we abandoned that idea,” he said.

Another question raised in the vetting process for projects was if one of the sending high school districts to county VoTech would be able to give them 35,000 square feet of space, but Bonsall said districts might have some space, but nowhere near this kind of large usable and versatile space.

County VoTech Business Administrator Corinne Steinmetz and assistant superintendent Richard A. Bergacs, representing the North Hunterdon-Voorhees Regional High School district, also appeared before the freeholder board. The trio was symbolic of what Bonsall described to the board as a “highly-collaborative, unique model with North Hunterdon High School to build a career and technical campus on their campus.”

Bergacs spoke to questions on the proposal posed by Soloway about adequate parking at NHHS and the potential need to hire more teachers. He said the parking on-site is adequate due to a lesser-used back lot.

“Our student population has slowly declined, so this would actually help us,” he said. ‘I don’t foresee a need to hire more teachers because it will allow us to retain the teachers we have for years to come. From a cost-benefit analysis view, this will help both the North Hunterdon-Voorhees district and the VoTech district, and our whole board of education supports the project and we’re really excited about the opportunity.”

Freeholder Zach Rich asked Steinmetz to comment on cost neutrality of pursuing this campus at North Hunterdon, and the contrast to setting up a satellite facility, which has a substantial rental cost involved. Steinmetz said the landlord for 8 Bartles Corner Road has been wonderful in working with VoTech, but the location is not specifically built for the C.T.E. school use.

She said the \$400,000 in rent paid each year could be moved, by 2023, to support the VoTech programs instead.

Rich said it boils down to the \$5 million the county committed to the new building, meaning it offsets the annual rental cost, and “exponentially after the \$5 million we are ahead of the game.”

“I am proud of the proposal Dr. Bonsall put together, and from the academic and financial standpoints, it is very sound and very financially responsible,” Steinmetz said. “Of all the types of programs and options we looked into, this one will bring the most value to our students, in the most financially responsible way that we can. When you look at a satellite space or other locations, being able to have that at a high school, one that as a national Blue Ribbon School and is already doing a fabulous job of academics, we should not try to replace something already there when we can focus on our C.T.E. programs. The prior proposal to build a campus for \$120 million has been dropped down to now potentially \$20 million, and our payments will support a facility we will actually own.”

Freeholder J. Matthew Holt told his colleagues and Bonsall that trends in the county’s workforce development are at the front of the discussion, as Hunterdon County’s population grew in the last 30 years of the 20th century, but at that time VoTech was established along that timeframe.

Over the long haul, he sees many benefits to the proposal.

“As far back as 10 years ago, we had said we need to find a better solution, and when will we find a direction for the PolyTech school,” he said. “But when we actually looked at cost per-education-hour that a student is receiving, it was tremendous. While it is being pointed out that the project when it is completed will be cost neutral and the county will be ahead minus the rental cost, the greater asset is that we are going to increase educational hours and create a much more normal educational scenario for every one of

the PolyTech students, allowing students to get the greatest, broadest spectrum of education that they can have and to make the best decisions they can at that age, as to what their career paths may look like.”

Freeholder John Lanza said the state funding through the Securing Our Children’s Future Bond Act could be the key to “funding a structural, major problem that we need to address, while they are picking up 75 cents on the dollar,” but the annual rent and other costs such as busing represented wasted spending for several years.

“Our students graduating from high school deserve a debt-free path to a job, and you are providing them with that,” he said. “Now we are going to have something physically built and tangible, while eliminating so much of the wastes of time and funds in transporting students back and forth. We will be using the money the county already spends to get something real and something that works for us. I truly appreciate how everyone is working to solve a problem and deliver us with a better product. It is really what we owe the kids coming through the VoTech.”