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Sustainable Building Supplements Learning at Seattle Schools

By Lucy Bodilly

Seattle Public Schools is in the midst of a \$490 million rebuilding program, paid for by a bond issue taxpayers approved in 2006.

The Building Excellence (BEX) program, now in its third phase, calls for renovating schools over the next few years and new construction at South Shore.

Based on studies that show that healthier interior environments improve learning, the district is incorporating as many sustainable elements as it can into the new buildings.

A total of 35 schools were renovated or replaced between 1998 and 2008, funded by the BEX I and BEX II levies. BEX III provides funds to renovate or replace four high schools, two middle schools, and one K-8 school, in addition to funding improvements to drinking water and indoor air quality district-wide.



Denny International School is co-located with Chief Sealth High School. A light filled galleria joins the two campuses. (Images courtesy of DKA)

Right now Nathan Hale High School, Hamilton International School, Chief Sealth High School, Denny International School and South Shore School are under construction.

The school district engaged voters from the very start of the levy approval process, says Pauline Sugarman of DKA.

“The district brought in volunteers from all interest groups and used a formal process to keep everyone informed about what is happening in their neighborhood.”



Hamilton International School was built in the 1920s as the first intermediate school in Seattle.

The team went through 12 charettes with the public, created an informational website and hotline, and holds quarterly community meetings with key project managers and the public.

The projects are being overseen by DKA and Heery International, both of Seattle, working as project managers.

“It’s a challenge to be a project manager in today’s environment,” says Chuck Clegern, a project manager at DKA. “We have to take into account the economy, public relations, and with people being more empowered though the internet.” “Everyone has to do a better job listening,” says Sugarman.

The school district awarded some contracts for the major portion of the current construction phase before the economic downturn, but some bids came in “about 20 percent lower than we expected”, says Clegern. “Current bids are based on more recent estimates and are coming in closer to what we expected, but still all below budget,” he says. The lower bids may allow more sustainable features to be built.

Currently green roofs are slated for Denny International School and South Shore School. If funding permits a green roof may be installed at Nathan Hale High School, says Don Gilmore, head of facilities planning at the school district.

The green roofs contractors installed at Denny and South Shore come pre-planted in a system similar to a carpet tile.

Other factors that the district hopes will improve learning are increased natural lighting, an increased number of air changes per hour and separate heat controls for every classroom.



The commons area at Hamilton International School brings daylight inside with an atrium.

Nathan Hale High School features a ground source heat pump consisting of 45 - 300 ft deep wells that will be used to heat the new library. The rest of the building will be heated with a highly efficient central boiler system.

Denny International Middle School and Chief Sealth High School are co-located on one campus in West Seattle.

The campus will provide new, separate outdoor student plazas for Chief Sealth High School and Denny International Middle School students. Landscaping and building forms express environmental sensitivity and a connection to nearby Longfellow Creek.



Nathan Hale High School includes facilities for KNHC C89.5 FM radio station, studios, and radio/TV classroom

The Chief Sealth High School modernization focuses on life-safety issues, improving energy efficiency and comfort, revitalizing the school’s appearance inside and out, and creating a superior educational environment.

A new, large Galleria space between the two schools offers the flexibility of either separate school, joint school or community uses. The light-filled and expressive structure will accommodate student services, student activity spaces, large display areas, and dining facilities.



Nathan Hale High School features radiant heating in parts of the building.