

## 10 Q's and 10 A's: A FAQ about HHS Overcrowding Solutions

### 1. How overcrowded is HHS, really? Can't we just make classes a little bigger?

HHS opened in 2005 with 1,277 students, a classroom capacity of 1,350 and a core capacity of 1,550. Classroom capacity maxes out when classes and labs are full. Core capacity depends on the size of spaces like cafeterias, auditoriums, and gymnasiums, as well as the width of connector areas like halls and stairways.

1,735 students currently attend HHS (28% above classroom capacity). Projected enrollment [in 5 years](#) (2022) is 2,266 students (67% above capacity), and in [10 years](#) (2027) is 2,518 (86% above capacity). Details are [here](#).

We have made classes bigger, and we've added trailers on both sides of the building to help expand classroom space ([see trailer cost and location at the HHS site here](#)). We can't build wider stairways, or a bigger kitchen, bathrooms, gymnasiums, or auditoriums in HHS as it is currently constructed. We can't make core spaces bigger without constructing an annex or an addition. An 800 person annex or addition would be full when it opened, and would lock us into becoming a 1 mega-high school town. HHS is really severely overcrowded.

### 2. Aren't you rushing into this? What's with all the urgency?

The DNR reported on School Board meetings to discuss crowding problems in HHS as early as February, 2008. The city's 2009 Comprehensive Plan included discussion of overcrowding. So we're not rushing here, we're finishing up a process that's been going on informally for nearly a decade, and very formally since [April, 2015](#), looking for a solution to a problem that is getting worse every week.

The timing is critical because any solution comes with a lag - the time it takes to design and build. New school facilities can't open in February, or October; they must open at the start of the school year. The urgency also comes from growth - the increases in number of children pouring into a system, and especially into a high school that is bursting at the seams. The overcrowding is severe and is affecting student learning and safety. As the economy continues to strengthen, the cost of every solution rises. Construction costs are increasing fast (Arlington is reportedly preparing a new HS for over \$140 million, and Loudoun County readying one for over \$100 million). Interest rates costs are going to increase. Every month we wait not only delays a real solution to the problem, but will cost us more money. Deciding to act sooner is much cheaper than choosing to delay.

### 3. Why is a new high school being talked about so much? Why aren't you considering other options?

We have, and this seems the most cost-effective solution for the long run. In order to wrap up this long problem-solving process, a city-wide committee was formed in March, 2017, to consider all options and to come up with a formal recommendation for the school board. They presented [their recommendation](#) - to build a second high school - at the May 16, 2017, School Board meeting. As part of their work, the committee:

- Toured HHS and [reported on its findings](#);
- Examined HS level enrollment levels [in other systems](#);
- Investigated the details behind an [Annex](#), an [Addition](#) and a [Second High School](#);
- Talked about [Alternative Schedules](#);
- Researched the [differences in operational costs](#) among these options.

The committee did not explicitly consider a reorganization of every grade distribution in every city school via the option of building another elementary school, pulling 6<sup>th</sup> grade back to elementary schools, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade back to the middle schools, leaving 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> at the high school. HHS would be over capacity, even with just three grades, very quickly; it would open in 2021 with 1,618 students in grades 10-12. This option has additional large operation costs. As this option has been raised publicly after the committee delivered its recommendation

to the school board, in order to explain the problems with this option more formally, details will be publicly presented during the June 6 School Board meeting.

**4. Wait a minute. Can't we use Simms?**

The School Board doesn't own Simms anymore. The city does, and Parks and Recs manages it. Simms isn't big enough to make a meaningful dent in the overcrowding problem. This historic facility currently serves a valuable role as an anchor for the Northeast Community.

**OK- then can we maybe get old HHS back and use that?**

No; JMU owns the Old HHS on South High, and has spent millions of dollars to renovate the building, fields, and grounds. The building houses the University's College of Education, and plays an important role in JMU's strategic plans for the future.

**5. I don't think that school buildings themselves really matter so much. It's the teachers that make a difference to students and how much they learn, right?**

Good teachers can and do transform lives. But good teachers need good facilities, and can't teach effectively in conditions of extreme overcrowding. HHS is stretched well beyond its functional capacities. Twenty-five percent of all teachers at HHS don't have their own classroom and must change to a new space period-by-period, making everything from class prep to connecting and helping students much more difficult. We know from exit interviews that some teachers have left HCPS because of the stress of severe overcrowding. We also know from HHS instructor [survey data](#) that current teachers at HHS also favor a second high school for many, many reasons. We encourage you to read the survey to understand the effects of overcrowding from their point of view.

**6. Won't this cost a lot? What are you going to do to my taxes?**

Yes, and your taxes will go up. A second high school is a legacy decision that will last for decades, a core infrastructure investment not only in our children, but in our long-term economic development as a city. City residents pay for city services, and cities that are growing as fast as Harrisonburg will inevitably require more services for more people. We all benefit directly and indirectly from living in a city, even from services we don't directly use - though we pay for fire trucks and EMS, we hope we never need them. Good schools attract families and businesses to the city and expand the tax base. The School Board is keenly aware of the financial implications of this decision, and heard a detailed presentation from Davenport & Co., Harrisonburg's bond advisors (part 1 [here](#), part 2 [here](#).)

Contrary to disinformation making its way through the city, resident real estate taxes will not increase by \$1,000. Any tax increase will depend on the assessed value of property. Local realtor Scott Rogers has estimated relevant monthly and yearly increases for a range of home values and [posted his analysis here](#). For a family that owns a home priced at the median Harrisonburg home value of \$250,000, property taxes will rise by about \$36 a month.

**7. What about seniors, and those of us on fixed income?**

All growth and investment requires tax revenue. How that tax burden falls on residents is up to City Council. Because we are home to JMU and are very close to I81, we rely on some taxes that fall heavily on students and visitors. Even so, real estate and property taxes are a major source of local revenue, and Harrisonburg provides [tax relief for the elderly and disabled](#), a program based in part on income. Other Virginia cities have somewhat [stronger tax abatement programs](#), and it is likely time for Harrisonburg to re-examine our own approach, adapting our policies as we grow into a larger city.

### 8. Didn't we just spend a lot of money on Bluestone Elementary?

BSE is opening on Garber's Church Road in August, and will accommodate 755 students. This new school, along with redistricting that takes effect this fall, will relieve overcrowding in the lower grades. It's a beautiful school that is going to serve city families by delivering excellent education for decades to come. Although it is brand new, it is not, contrary to local reports, the most expensive elementary school in the state of Virginia. From the Virginia Department of Education [website](#), for example:

#### **2016-2017**

Harrisonburg Blue Stone Elementary: Total costs/Sq Ft: \$249.86; Building costs/Sq Ft: \$206.50.

#### **2014-2015**

Lexington Elementary: Total costs/Sq Ft: \$262.16. Building costs/Sq Ft: \$232.32.

#### **2013-2014**

Arlington Discovery Elementary: Total costs/Sq Ft: \$331.04; Building costs/Sq Ft: \$288.97.

### 9. Wouldn't building a second high school raise our taxes a lot higher than Rockingham County?

Our taxes are higher than Rockingham County, and financing a second high school will widen the gap.

There are reasons for this difference. From 2009-2017, Harrisonburg Schools have [increased enrollment by 34.6%](#). During the same period, Rockingham County schools lost 1.1% enrollment. Given that Harrisonburg is the 11<sup>th</sup> largest city in Virginia and one of the fastest growing localities in the state, the relevant real estate tax comparison is to other cities in the state, not to rural counties. For the next fiscal year, Harrisonburg's tax rate will be \$.85 per \$100 of real estate value. Increasing the real estate tax rate to build a second high school puts Harrisonburg [right in line with other cities in the Commonwealth](#):

- VA Cities Average Tax Rate = \$1.04; VA Cities Median Tax Rate = \$1.07;
- VA City Average Real Estate Tax for cities with > 5% population growth rates = \$1.03;
- VA City Average Real Estate Tax w/pop up to 49K = \$1.00 --- and w/pop 50K-99K = \$1.08.

It's also worth noting that virtually every city in Virginia with a better bond rating than Harrisonburg (Aa1 vs. our Aa2 Moody's score) also has a higher real estate tax rate than our current rate:

- Falls Church: \$1.25
- Hampton: \$1.24
- Manassas: \$1.35
- Suffolk: \$1.00
- Chesapeake: \$1.04
- Newport News: \$1.18

### 10. I'm worried about splitting the town if we build another high school. Won't this just end up dividing us?

Cost issues aside, this is the primary concern residents raise about building a second high school. A very large HHS already acts to divide Harrisonburg High School students from other schools (and thus other communities) in the Valley, in that competition in all areas – theater, music, debate, sports – occurs with similar sized large high schools and erases decades of friendly, local competition in our area. Countless localities have added second, third, and a fourth high schools to their school system.

If we choose as a city to build a second high school, we'll have three years to work together to make all these critically important decisions (who goes where, what programs are duplicated, how it all will work, etc.) in a way that aligns with our values as a community, our vision for our future, and our belief that every child deserves an education that prepares them for the rest of their lives.