

Tuesday, January 25, 2005



The proposed high school would sit on 200 acres at 23 Mile and North Avenue. The land is leased to a sod farmer.

Catholics asked to fund high school

Organizers need \$24 million to break ground next year at 23 Mile and North Avenue.

By Mike Wowk / The Detroit News

MACOMB TOWNSHIP -- Catholics throughout central and northern Macomb County soon will be asked to reach deep into their pockets and pull out up to \$24 million.

That's the estimated price tag, minus already donated land, to build the county's first new Catholic high school in decades.

Depending on how the fund raising goes, organizers say they hope to break ground next year at 23 Mile and North Avenue and open doors to 800 to 1,000 coeducational students by 2007. But they admit that's optimistic.

Surveys of parents in local Catholic parishes show both great interest in and demand for a high school, organizers say.

"About one-third of the students at Lutheran High School North (on 24 Mile in Macomb Township) are Catholic," Ray Skowronski Jr., a parent and member of the steering committee for the proposed school, told a meeting of about 100 people in St. John Vianney Catholic Church in Shelby Township last week.

"About one in five of the families within a five-mile radius of (our site) are Catholic," Skowronski added. "So we know the need is there."

Similar informational meetings will be held during the next few months at several other Catholic parishes throughout central and northern Macomb County to drum up interest in the project.

James Finn, an engineering manager who lives in Shelby Township and a father of two students in a Catholic grade school in Rochester and a third in preschool, is looking forward to the high school.

"The nearest Catholic high school is not very near," Finn said.

Suburban growth is the major reason a vacant 200 acres on 23 Mile, west of North Avenue, is being considered for a high school. The land is owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit and leased to a local sod farmer.

Just as Detroiters moved north into south Macomb County in the 1950s and 1960s, and later waves of transplants moved ever northward, churches, schools, roads, sewers and other urban improvements have rushed to catch up.

The Rev. Jerome Machlik, 60, pastor of St. John Vianney, offered himself as an example. While growing up on the east side of Detroit, he attended Catholic schools from kindergarten through seminary.

But much of that community is long gone, having moved to the suburbs.

His Shelby Township parish, which recently completed a major construction project, is an example of a transplanted community.

While numerous Catholic and other religious schools have closed in Detroit and in the near suburbs in recent decades, there is a need for schools in growing communities like Shelby and Macomb townships, Machlik said.

Unlike the 1950s, when convents and seminaries were full of nuns and other religious people willing to work for low wages, most Catholic schools today are staffed by higher-paid lay teachers, Machlik said.

"Education is an incredibly expensive business today," the pastor told the parents' meeting.

Leonard Brillati, president of the board organizing the still unnamed Macomb County Regional Catholic High School, said corporate and individual donors have been contacted.

"We have some commitments from major donors," he said. But he also knows much of the needed \$24 million will have to come in small donations from families.

That was the reason for the informational meeting last week at St. John Vianney. Another meeting is set for 7 p.m. Feb. 24 at St. Lawrence Church in Utica, with other meetings to follow.

The archdiocese has given Brillati's group use of the 200-acre parcel at 23 Mile and North Avenue to develop as a school site.

But now it's up to the group and its supporting parishes and their families to come up with the money to build and operate the school.

He estimated that remaining cost to be about \$24 million.

A school could be built for less, said Skowronski, but to be competitive and to attract students, the new high school would have to offer comparable amenities like sports, computer technology, and other features that public schools and top private schools offer.

The new high school would focus on college preparatory academics, "but the archdiocese insists we do not develop an elitist attitude," Machlik said.

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