

Facility creates excitement in Elkhorn

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ELKHORN - Really, you can't miss it.

Drive into Elkhorn from the east and you'll have to loop underneath the overpass and up to a county highway that leads into town. Make a left turn, and before your turn signal stops flashing your eyes lock on to a building that already is one of the gems of the local school district.

The massive white structure covers almost 60,000 square feet and reaches about 60 feet high at its peak. On its side is a message that serves as a symbol of pride to the locals and warning to the rest of the Southern Lakes Conference and beyond.

"Home of the Elks"

"The first time they put 'Home of the Elks' on the side of the Agility Center, everyone was like 'Did you see that, did you see this?'" said Vince Umnus, a senior soccer and basketball player. "When the turf field wasn't down, people who don't play sports were like 'When is that field going to be down ... is the weight room open? I want to get there.'"

These are exciting times at Elkhorn High School.

A referendum passed two years ago that addressed a number of upgrades, additions or renovations that were called for in the district's long-range facilities plan. This summer folks in the community started to see their tax dollars in action.

Improvements touch many facets of the school

The arts have a renovated auditorium and specially designed rooms for art class. Culinary arts has a new kitchen. Agricultural science has a new greenhouse. The Career and Technical Education area, the computer science wing and special education area have been renovated.

It is the athletic facility upgrades, however, that will catch the most eyes. Sports draws more visitors to high schools than almost any other activity, and when folks come to Elkhorn, there are plenty of new things to see.

■ New bleachers for the football stadium were part of the 2015 referendum. The second phase of the project includ-



In the weight room at Elkhorn High School's new practice facility, freshman Dominick Gasperik, 14, works out at the bench press while being spotted by fellow freshman Cooper Damask, 14. MICHAEL SEARS / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

ed the addition of a turf surface, which was installed this summer. A new surface for the track is expected to be completed this fall.

■ As you enter the stadium, there are eights recently resurfaced or relocated tennis courts. Just beyond the football field, two softball fields are being built and scheduled to be done this fall.

■ The district purchased 56 acres of land east of the school, part of which will be used for multi-purpose athletic fields.

■ Inside, the gym floor has been sanded and updated with a new design before new stain was applied.

The Agility Center, as Elkhorn calls it, is what sets the project apart. It's so large the varsity football, soccer, gymnastics and cheerleader squads can practice inside at the same time. It is believed to be the fourth facility of its type for a high school in the state. Sussex Hamilton's opened in spring of 2015. Kaukauna's opened in the spring of 2016. Kimberly's opened in last summer.

"In my opinion, it's a well-thought out plan that solves a lot of problems or

areas of need that we had," Elks athletic director Dan Kiel said as he watched a football game last week. "This field, if you had one wet night, the field was torn up for the year. You can't get it back."

Upgrades create modest tax hikes

The improvements are the result of referendums passed in 2015 and '16. The 2016 referendum, which included the auditorium and Agility Center, was \$23 million. The portion of funds devoted to athletics was \$9 million.

According to the district, the estimated additional cost of the project to the average tax payer was \$8 per every \$100,000 of property value. The increase was modest, in part, because of debt that was coming off the books.

"By waiting for debt to expire to ask for the referendum, it had a minimal impact on taxpayers, so they're willing to say, 'Ok, yeah. It's only going to cost us X more than what we're already paying. We can support that,'" Elkhorn superintendent Jason Tadlock said.

Open enrollment in the state has cre-

ated competition for students, and Elkhorn is as Tadlock said, "high on the open enrollment end." Open enrollment wasn't a factor in the improvements, though, he said.

Some of the need came from general wear and tear on a building that opened in 1967. Another factor has been the district's growth. Twenty years ago the high school enrollment was about 500. This year it will push 1,000.

"Open enrollment is always sort of competitive," Tadlock said. "I think some of our neighboring districts are nervous or have mentioned we have such big facilities now that that might be a draw, but honestly it's never come up as a conversation point for us. It's just been more of a focus on what we have here available for our kids."

The facility meets many needs

So why does a high school need an indoor facility that some colleges would love to have?

A big advantage is the flexibility of being able to work inside or out. That is a huge issue for in the spring in Wisconsin where the winter-like weather can last into April and sometimes beyond.

At Elkhorn, the grass fields next to the stadium don't drain well, making for a difficult place to practice after a good rain. The school also needed the space. The Elks offer 19 sports and have a no-cut policy for all of them.

Elkhorn's facility, which opened this summer, can be used as one 60-yard field for football or soccer or it can be split into as many as four areas. There are two other areas in the Agility Center. One will be devoted to cheerleading and the other to the gymnastics team, giving each a year-round space they can use.

On the opposite end of the facility is a 5,400-square foot weight room that is more than three times as large as what the school previously had. They've gone from a set up that was designed to hold 25 individuals at one time to one that can handle 54 on the weight racks alone.

In the middle a field equipped with the same fast-track turf used at the stadium.

"I think there are a lot of school districts and communities who could benefit from having something similar-type facilities," Tadlock said. "It's within reach if you as a community want that."