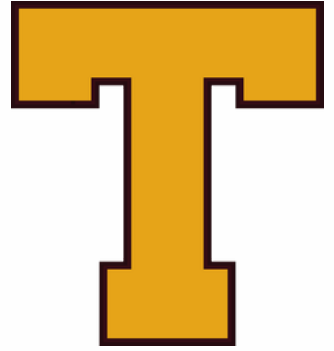




New Improved Media Center

Tolleson Union High School Builds on Campus Renewal as Bond Could Fund Next Wave of Improvements

By: Staff Writer

Tolleson Union High School has undergone a sweeping transformation in recent years, adding modern learning, performance and gathering spaces to a campus that has served generations of students. Now, district leaders and students are looking toward a new round of improvements that would be possible if voters approve the district's proposed bond.

During a recent episode of the Tolleson Union High School District's Education Exchange podcast, Superintendent Jeremy Calles joined Principal Martin Perez and student council leaders Jasmine Bilavahn, the student body president, and Elianna Rodriguez, the student body vice president, to discuss the campus improvements already completed and the needs that remain.

Calles said Tolleson Union's campus has received one of the district's most extensive makeovers of the past decade. Recent additions include a two-story media center, a renovated Wolverine Den, a new 500 building, a new science building, stadium improvements and a performing arts center that has changed the way students experience school programs and performances.

"Honestly, it's a major difference between the auditorium in Old Main and the new PAC [performing arts center] building because of how modernized it is and all the new technology that has been added," Rodriguez said. "The sound system is better, and it makes our program look more professional."

The media center has also become more than a traditional library. Its two floors, meeting and study areas, technology space and first-floor coffee shop give students room to work, gather and recharge throughout the school day.

"A lot of people go in there for meetings, to relax or even to eat lunch," Jasmine said. "Having two stories gives us more space, especially with about 3,000 people at our school. People use it for labs, computer time and making up assignments. It is really impactful to our school."

Perez said the new facilities communicate something important to students and employees about what they deserve. He described the performing arts center as one of the strongest facilities in the West Valley and said it has become a point of pride for the campus.

"It sends a strong message that our staff and our students should have access to the best state-of-the-art facilities out there," Perez said.

The discussion also focused on projects the district hopes to pursue if the bond passes. Among the most significant is a full-size competitive gymnasium with higher ceilings, multiple courts and expanded bleacher capacity. The current gym must accommodate physical education, athletics, assemblies and student activities, limiting both scheduling and opportunities for growth.

"Having that old gym has been really hard for us because of the sound system, the lighting and trying to fit 3,000 students into three different assemblies," Jasmine said. "Having a new gym would be good for assemblies, games and sports. I think it would have a good impact on our school."

Rodriguez, who plays volleyball, said the limitations affect competition and practice as well. Balls can strike or become lodged in the low ceiling, she said, sometimes interrupting play. A new competitive gym would also allow the existing gym to serve as an auxiliary space, potentially creating room for additional offerings such as boys volleyball and badminton.

"I feel like a big competitive gym would benefit us and the programs that use the gym," Rodriguez said. She added that the current space has made it difficult for the school to host statewide student council events.

Plans discussed on the podcast also include a sports complex south of campus, across Wolverine Way. The proposed complex could add practice fields, basketball courts and pickleball courts while creating a recreational asset that could serve the broader community outside school hours. Students and administrators said the added fields would reduce scheduling conflicts among football, flag football, marching band, cross-country and other programs.

"With the creation of a new sports facility, it would provide the opportunity to maximize the time and, more importantly, send a strong message that we want to make sure that we're competitive," Perez said. "Our students, our coaches and our community here at Tolleson are doing what we can with what we have."

Another priority is relief from Arizona's heat. Students described outdoor seating areas where existing shade does not adequately block the sun. Additional shade structures, large fans, seating and green space are among the ideas being considered to make movement across the concrete-heavy campus safer and more comfortable.

"It's Arizona, so it's going to be hot regardless," Rodriguez said. "But definitely the shade and more seating areas would be really helpful."

The bond could also support a new building for University High School, which shares the campus and is currently housed in older buildings. Calles noted that University High is nationally ranked and among Arizona's highest-performing schools. Jasmine said those students need a space that matches the work they do.

"They need their own space and their own area," she said. "It would be good for them to excel in what they do and move forward with their learning."

Improving parking and traffic flow is another major concern. With Tolleson Union and University High serving close to 3,000 students on the site, parking areas are heavily used by students, staff and visitors. The district is considering converting a former maintenance area into staff parking and widening Wolverine Way so buses and other vehicles can use it more efficiently, easing congestion on Van Buren Street.

"Adding more parking is really crucial for us," Jasmine said, noting that students sometimes park in restricted areas after available spaces fill. Rodriguez added that expanded parking and improved access could "lessen the traffic" for students trying to reach their spaces.

Calles said the district also seeks flexibility in its bond planning so it can respond as campus needs evolve. Students raised possible upgrades to stadium lighting and sound, along with modernization of older restrooms, as additional areas for consideration.

"The students are our future," Calles said. "I would want you to bring your children here and be able to say, 'We actually used to talk about those improvements when I was going to school here. It is so great to see that they made them.'"

For Perez, the conversation is ultimately about the daily experience of students and ensuring that their voices help shape future investments.

"Our students should be proud of where they go to school and where they come every day," Perez said. "If we are able to collectively work on these projects, it elevates the student experience and, in turn, maximizes student achievement."

The completed projects offer a visible measure of how much Tolleson Union High School has changed. The proposed bond now presents voters with a decision about whether the district can move forward with the next set of improvements - expanding athletic and academic space, addressing heat and congestion, and preparing the 100-year-old campus for future generations.

For more information, please visit our podcast: <https://youtu.be/CrEFz5ytOEA?si=P0Zs5yYOpys2ENIb>