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VSDDB to update campus for consolidation

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## **STAUNTON —**

Many buildings have come and gone at the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind since its founding in 1838.

Bass replaced Montague. Tyler burned and made way for Battle. Many other halls sprouted up in the 1940s, '50s and '60s — some without a sense of their audience, others, well-constructed and much loved. But through it all, the old battle-ax, Main Hall, constructed in the 1830s, remains.

Beginning next year, this stately structure, which welcomed deaf and blind students way before the Civil War, will once again be renovated. But this time, instead of indoor plumbing and electricity, it will get soundproof barriers, central air and an elevator.

Other buildings, like Peery and Swanson, also are slated for massive renovations.

Last year, after members of the legislature decided to combine overnight students from both Hampton Roads and Staunton onto the Queen City campus, the oldest school of its kind in the U.S., architectural plans were drawn up.

The Richmond architecture firm BCWH, with the help of John Dickinson, a deaf architect, labored over many different renderings, finally capturing what they thought to be the center of the campus.

Fred Yates, a graduate of Gallaudet University, the University of Virginia and California State University in Northridge, said that though there may be sadness, he is happy with the outcome.

"I think developing a program in a synchronized and timely fashion is much to be preferred over the building by building process that the school has undergone in its over 160 years," said former VSDDB student, teacher, principal and alumni association leader, Yates.

"I hate to see magnificent Byrd Hall demolished as it has sheltered many, many children," he said. "But it has been so hard to keep that building usable and various problems have emerged with it. Darden was a mistake in design, not really able to meet the needs of deaf kids. Bass Hall, it's a shame to see it discarded."

Byrd Hall, which was built in 1928, served many functions; but, because of its need for repairs, it has been closed for almost two decades.

J.H. Cline, a former physical education teacher, wrestling coach and full-time student at the school, also is sad to see Byrd Hall go, but thrilled that the Chapel made it through the cut.

"We've put in a lot of money into a lot of buildings to upgrade them," he said. "They should have tried a little harder to incorporate a little more."

But all in all, he said the main purpose of the campus is to send deaf and blind students out to be well-prepared and educated citizens.

## **Concerns**

Linda Jones-Oleson, a speech pathologist, who has been with the school for more than two decades is concerned not about which buildings stand and which ones come down, but about the transition of multi-handicapped

students from Hampton to Staunton during construction.

"The timeline sounds a little backwards. We're going to have students on the ground before we meet the criteria to help them," she said. "We're happy to have the kids from Hampton, but I'm just under no illusions about services and personnel. Where do you find the qualified people?"

Casey Morehouse, an audiologist at the school, has similar concerns about finding staff and making the area accessible for incoming handicapped students. Her two sons attended VSDB. One is in 10th grade. The other, who uses a wheelchair, graduated a couple years ago. Morehouse remembers the difficulties he faced in getting around with his wheelchair.

"The idea that the majority of the campus will be on the top of the hill (is good)," she said. "In general, I am happier with the design than I anticipated. It's been a long, difficult road for staff, parents and alumni, not knowing what is going to happen to the school. They have a framework, but now it's down to the nitty-gritty."

Kierra Davis, a former Hampton Roads student, transferred to the Staunton campus two years ago. At first, her mother was apprehensive.

"I explained that it had higher education," she said. Davis, 15, plans to attend college upon graduation. Along with the helpful staff and educational benefits, she enjoys the topography.

"I love going around the campus. It teaches you a lot of obstacle courses," she said. "I like the hill because it gives me exercise."

The architects are planning to make the main campus as level as possible, but like Davis, many blind students do not see stairs and hills as a barrier, instead they view these obstacles as learning experiences.

Former blind student, Martha McGinnis, enjoyed the challenges of the campus.

"Life is bumpy," she said. "You need the different levels and challenges."

## General Reactions

Current Superintendent Nancy Armstrong is exited. Although saddened by the loss of Byrd Hall, she's ready to move on and watch the campus grow.

"It's going to be a wonderful plan to serve students," she said.

Sen. Emmett Hanger, R-Mount Solon, went to last Tuesday's campus plan unveiling in hopes of catching the pulse of the residents.

"I was pleased with the reaction of the staff and the community to the proposed plan," he said. "I think the plan is a good plan."

Hanger, along with Del. Chris Saxman, R-Staunton, worked hard to keep the campus in Staunton. Although Saxman was unable to attend the unveiling, he is glad that plans are moving ahead.

Legislators, faculty and students alike hope the warm, encouraging atmosphere that VSDB has provided for more than a century will not disappear.

"It's (VSDB) more than just bricks and mortar," said Mary Murray, the director of residential programming. "It's not just a facility to us. It's a community."

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