

# Sixth-grade academy is 'not just a North Heights project'

Spencer Lahr Jul 27, 2017 Updated 12 hrs ago



Rome City Schools is planning to have North Heights Elementary School refurbished into a sixth-grade academy as one of its projects to be funded through an extension of the 1-cent education local option sales tax. Voters will decide on the ELOST in the November election. (Spencer Lahr / RN-T.com)

The plan by **Rome City Schools** to make North Heights Elementary into a sixth-grade academy does not just impact those who would go there, but would affect each elementary school as well by opening up classrooms formerly occupied by sixth-graders, said Superintendent Lou Byars.

"We are in essence adding classrooms to every elementary school," he said. "They can take that space and now where we're busting at the seams, we don't necessarily have to go into trailers. We can actually use those spaces to relieve some pressure in some of our schools."

There may not be "brick and mortar going up or construction crews at these schools," Byars said, but three to five classrooms would be freed up at each school, allowing room to cut down class sizes.



Byars has stressed that as a superintendent he has to take action to address the space constraints that come with a growing student population in the system, and at some point, kids just can't keep being added to classrooms, he said.

There is a 10-year pattern, going back to the Great Recession, where about each year an average of 100 new students come into the system, Byars explained, going from about 5,200 to 6,200 last school year.

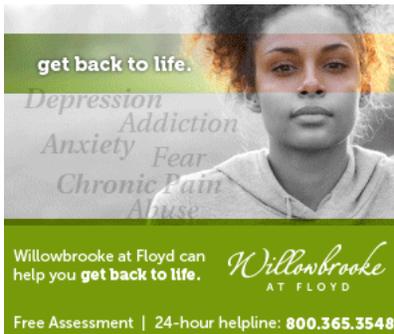
The elementary schools with the greatest need for additional space are West Central and West End, he added, but other schools are not far behind in needing an increased number of classrooms.

If another five years of the 1-cent education local option sales tax — the current ELOST runs out in spring 2019 — is approved by voters on Nov. 7, then it would set in motion two linked projects to be funded through it for the school system. Work on restructuring North Heights — current plans call for the building of about 22 extra classrooms — wouldn't begin until a new Main Elementary is built and students can move back from North Heights, which starting this year will house its own students along with Main students.

Making a sixth-grade academy is projected to cost between \$8 million and \$9 million. About half of the overall cost of making the academy would be reimbursed by state capital outlay funds, which provides funding specifically for modifying and refurbishing school buildings.

By early 2018, the system could start work on building a new Main in a process that is estimated to take about a year and a half, and the new school would open for students in the 2019-2020 school year, Byars said. Since the system is expanding and refurbishing the current North Heights rather than constructing a new building from scratch, getting the sixth-grade academy ready for students would take about a year, which would set the opening for the 2020-2021 school year, he added.

The current third-graders — there were 497 in February, 44 more than the sixth-grade class at that time — would be the first sixth-graders at the academy, which the system wants to be STEAM — science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics — focused and a launching off point for career pathways.



On Monday, Mayor Jamie Doss said during the commission's caucus, "The City Commission supports the ELOST." Commissioner Sue Hamler Lee, a former educator, said on Wednesday that a sixth-grade academy is an "excellent opportunity" to bring all the sixth-graders together for the first time before they head off to middle school, producing a social advantage to the system's plan. An academy would also give kids a chance to dabble in what their interests are and to start thinking about careers, she added.

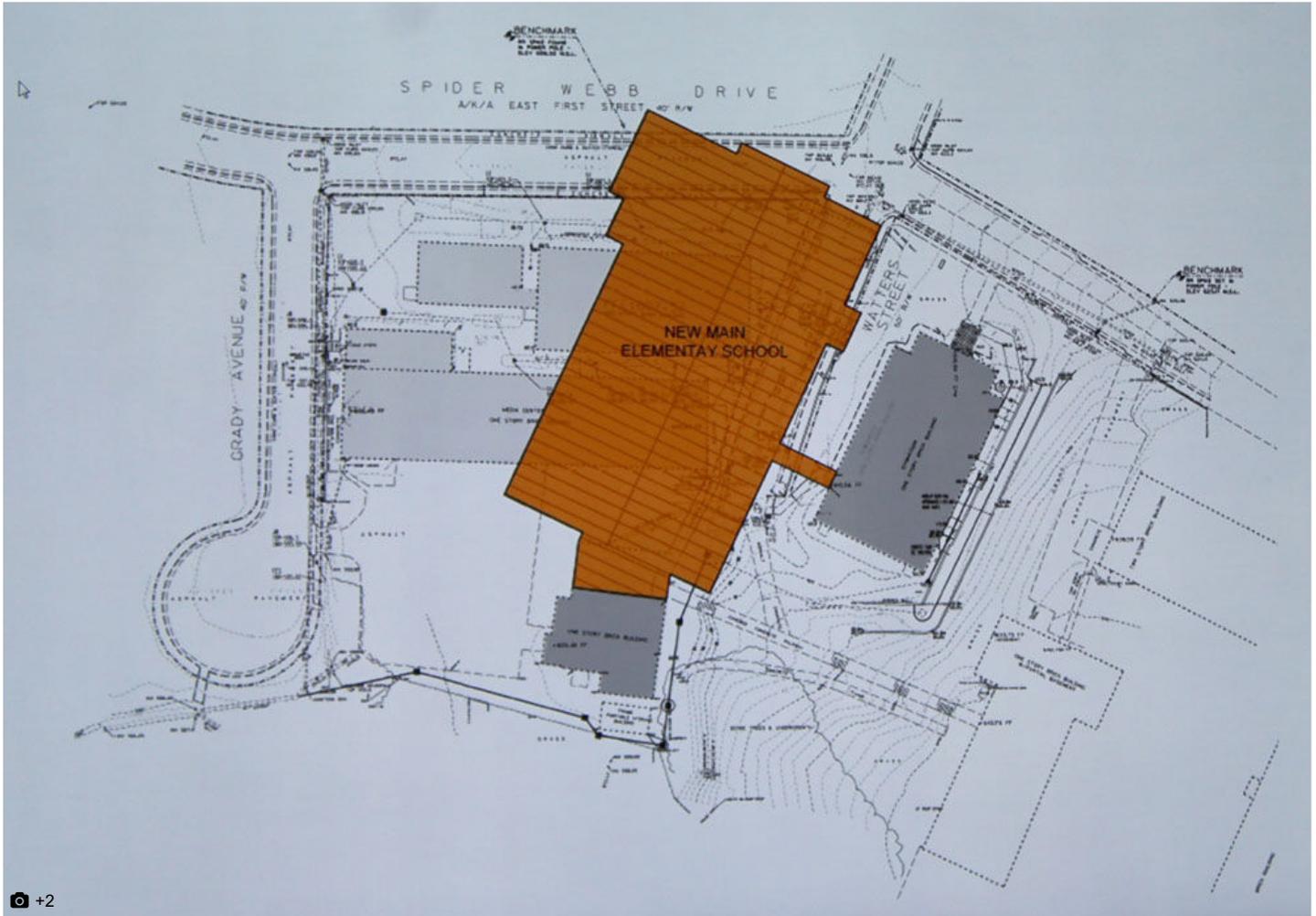
"When you're educating kids, you want them to be good citizens and productive people for the community and themselves, and find something they are passionate about," Lee continued.

A new fine arts building would also be built and connected to the gym at North Heights, since state guidelines push for schools with middle schoolers to have a dedicated space for things like band, Byars said. The academy's design would be adaptable, an important feature for ensuring the building can be improved upon as needs demand, specifically those related to technology, he added.

The system seeks to gather a wealth of input from students, staff, parents and community members over the two years of construction on a new Main, to see what they'd like to see included in the academy. A major focus is to have the school equipped to provide an environment for kids to explore through interactive and hands-on experiences, Byars said.

"It's going to be centered around the student," Byars said, adding it's not just about having a nice facility, but creating an atmosphere where students have all the opportunities to exceed.

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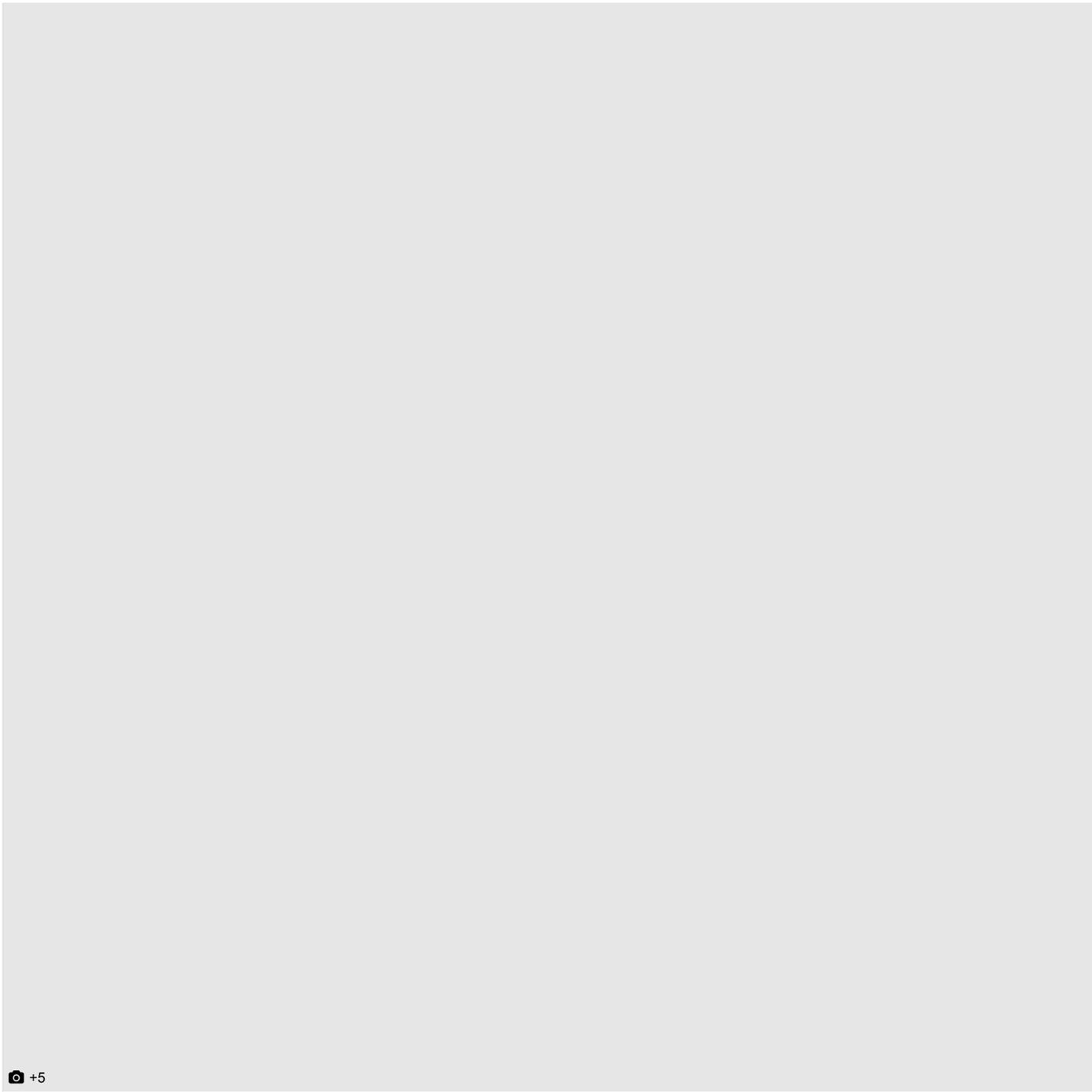


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Spencer Lahr