



MORTON

UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

July 15, 2020

Property exchange clears way for larger MJHS footprint, win-win for community

Morton School District 709 has completed a property swap with the Village of Morton that will allow for more parking, enhanced public safety and additional green space at Morton Junior High School. Morton school and village officials are calling it a big win-win for the community.

The Morton School Board already had approved Phases 1 and 2 of the \$7 million renovation and expansion of the junior high facility and surrounding property.

Phase 1 called for a new drop-off/pickup area, new office space with a more secure entryway, additional parking, new elevator and additional classrooms. Phase 2 will include a gymnasium, storage and new locker rooms, along with expanded cafeteria space.



On July 6, the Morton Village Board approved an exchange of real estate that will take those improvements up a notch, with the School Board doing likewise on July 7.

The school district is trading 17 acres plus of unimproved farmland on Harding



Road for village property on Second Avenue and East Harrison Street near the junior high. That property includes five homes that will be razed or moved to make way for a desperately needed, 156-space parking lot, a three-lane drop-off and pickup zone, new sidewalks and curbs, and a sizeable playground/green space area.

Meanwhile, there's a third component to this, with Morton Rentals leaving its current 445 E. Birchwood address in order to expand on those 17 acres. The Village of Morton will then construct a new municipal gas and water building on that vacated 4.7 acre site at the corner of Birchwood and Fourth, in the heart of the community.

All of the involved parties had high praise for the multi-layered deal.

"This is a project that had about 100 moving parts. If any part failed, this entire project would have failed," said School Board President Shad Beaty, adding that this "highlights what can be done when governmental agencies work together for a common, mutual improvement in a community. This is exactly that."

Moreover, "this allows a phenomenal business that's been growing and thriving to stay in our community. It allows the school district to make exceptional improvements to our junior high, (and) allows it to be beneficial to our students for another 20 plus years."

Compared to what school officials originally envisioned for the junior high, this agreement “put it over the moon,” said Superintendent Jeff Hill, calling it “an amazing enhancement to the Morton Junior High School environment, to the neighborhood environment, and really something that will be long-lasting for the Morton community.”

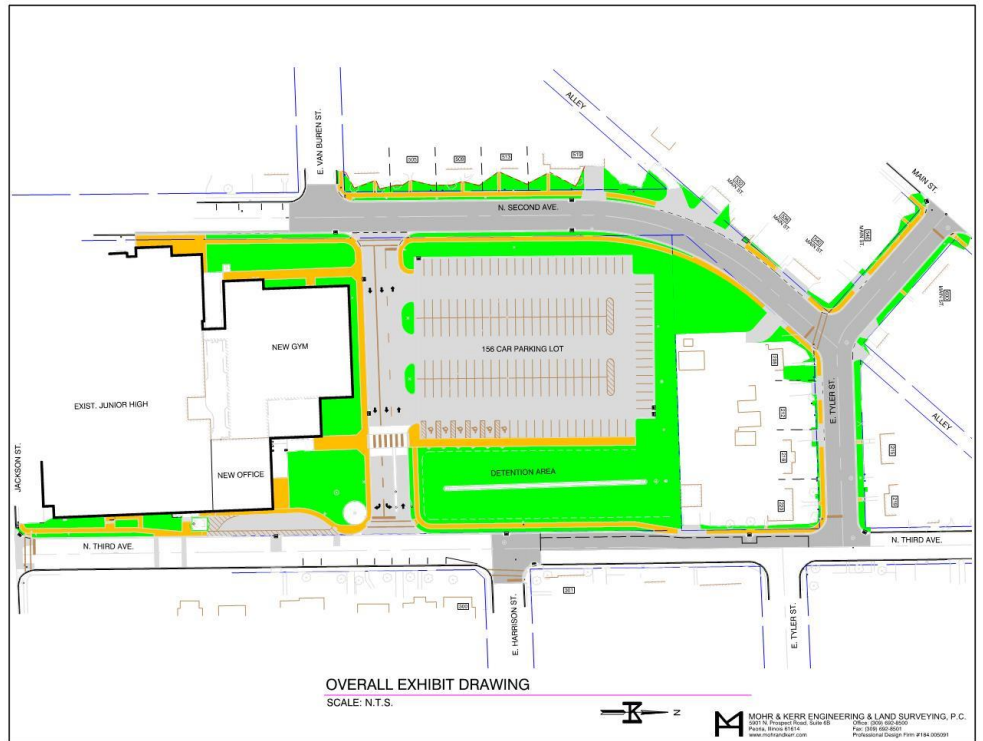
“Everybody worked together like we never have before,” said Morton Mayor Jeff Kaufman.

“We’re really improving the neighborhood. I think the house values are going to go up.

“In 40 years or so, people are going to look at this and say, ‘This was a great idea ... They won’t remember any of our names and that’s fine, because it’s the right thing to do for Morton, Illinois.’”

District 709 has budgeted an extra \$1 million for this latest development. Realistically, the project should be finished no later than the end of the spring 2021 semester.

“This obviously is going to fix a lot of our traffic problems. It’s going to fix our parking issue. That’s probably the biggest complaint we get,” said Junior High Principal Lee Hoffman, adding that the school will be able to host events it simply could not before. “We know there will be a few challenges through the fall, but we have a plan for that. We’ll figure out a way to make sure our kids are safe through the construction, and we’ll look forward to the spring when it’s all getting completed.”



###