

# Watch Now: Amherst supervisors approve financing \$19.4M for high school addition, renovation

Justin Faulconer

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In this January 2022 photo, then-Amherst County High School Principal Derrick Brown explains where a new auditorium would be placed in upcoming renovations scheduled for the school.

New Era-Progress file photo

A proposed addition and renovation at Amherst County High School has received financing support from the county's board of supervisors, paving the way for the largest construction project at the facility in more than 20 years.

The board on Jan. 18 agreed to finance \$19.4 million for a phased renovation with a new auditorium, a renovated cafeteria and food court, conversion of existing dining space into career and technical educational (CTE) uses, upgrades to make Lancer Stadium compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act, adding a fieldhouse next to the baseball and softball fields, and additional parking.

The Amherst County School Board has said it will contribute \$8 million toward the \$19 million project through a combination of federal stimulus money from the American Rescue Plan Act and funding from the school division's capital improvement plan. Supervisors also are funding the project through restructuring the county's overall debt.

Derrick Brown, the high school's principal, said the project will mark the most significant work since a renovation to the science wing in the early to mid-1990s.

"I'm elated," Brown said. "This is a long time coming. It's something that's definitely needed. Our theater program, our fine arts, our band, our chorus program, they have just top-notch performers and students have such great talent. And to be able to put

them in a world-class facility that's going to be able to facilitate and host events that showcase their talent is really exciting, not just for me but for the county. This is a county facility."

Brown said the new auditorium, which is planned in the rear of the school adjacent to the two gymnasiums, will greatly expand seating and enhance the overall auditorium experience with much more space for bringing the community together for events. A new hallway will connect the new auditorium and gyms.

The cafeteria will be much enhanced with a food court. The entrance at the rear of the school will be redone, and the work will free up space to provide more offerings for CTE programs, according to school officials.

Supervisors considered two scenarios: funding \$13.8 million for the auditorium addition and cafeteria renovation with the remaining work to come in later years, or funding the entire work at \$19.1 million. The board decided to take advantage of low interest rates in borrowing money and restructuring its debt while adding \$300,000 for parking needs.

Supervisor Tom Martin said the board should plan for additional parking and the \$300,000 could be set aside if needed. The new auditorium will take up the majority of the current parking area in the rear of the school so added parking will be a factor in the project.

"That's one of my biggest concerns is we do all this and don't have that parking area," Martin said. "I think we would be amiss if we went and did this entire project and did not think about redoing that parking area."

Superintendent Rob Arnold said he is confident the division and county can work out the parking issues in future discussions. He thanked the supervisors for lending financial support to the project.

"I'm very pleased and excited that they, like we do, see the benefit in this project for our community," Arnold said. "We've said all along this is not just about the school, this about the Amherst community and having a space where our entire community can come together. I just want to applaud the Board of Supervisors for taking this big step."

Arnold said the Amherst County School Board understood limitations in funding and directed him to bring the first two phases at \$13.8 million forward to supervisors, but with rates where they are, it made financial sense to move forward with the entire project.

The addition and renovation will better serve students in theater arts, fine arts and related areas and CTE possibilities in making them better "life ready" citizens, he said.

"It's all about opportunity," Arnold said. "It's really going to open space in the rest of our building."

Assistant Superintendent William Wells during the Jan. 18 meeting explained ways in which the CTE offerings will improve with added space, including more bays for welding, among other upgrades. More space means more students can take advantage of those offerings, which school and county officials tout as paramount in getting many students ready for life after high school and the local workforce.

“... I’ve said on the front end of this to many of the school board members that if we have not solved for the CTE and vocational, I won’t support that,” Supervisor Claudia Tucker said. “It’s that important to me to take care of these kids.”

County Administrator Dean Rodgers said the borrowing capacity for the county is healthy and it can afford to borrow without a major hit to the debt service.

“I was surprised we could take on that amount of debt without raising taxes, basically,” said David Pugh, the board’s chair. “With the way inflation is going... I assume it would probably be prudent to take out the \$19 million and do the project while the money is cheaper. It hurts me to do this but it is probably is the smart thing and the right thing to do.”

Rodgers said as the county pays off its debt it has more capacity to borrow money.

“Right now rates are at historic lows,” Rodgers said. “To get ahead of that, we will borrow money while it’s cheap, and if it increases we will have caught low-cost money for the high school project. As rates have declined, we have refinanced our higher-cost debt to get a lower interest rate. We do that consistently.”

Rates can’t get any lower, Rodgers said, so supervisors are taking advantage while the opportunity is available.

“We need to get as much as we can right now at really no cost to the taxpayer,” Rodgers said. “It’s very convenient.”

Patricia Emmert, the high school’s drama program instructor, has addressed supervisors recently on how important the auditorium addition is for students.

“I cannot explain how much this will impact all Amherst County students,” Emmert said following the county’s decision. “I do know their stage, figuratively and literally, has just become bigger and brighter and it will give the community an opportunity to see all the talents that lie within ACHS.”

She added at some point she plans to do right by past students and invite them back as alumni to perform on the new expanded stage “so they can see how all their hard work and talents for all those years did not go unnoticed.”

#### **Five stages of Amherst high school addition, renovation**

Auditorium addition: \$11,576,241

Cafeteria renovation: \$2,259,163

Career and technical education: \$3,275,778

Stadium renovation, fieldhouse: \$2,021,218

Additional parking: \$300,000

*Source: County of Amherst*

# Amherst County administrator resigns after eight years in role

Justin Faulconer

Sep 22, 2022



In this June 2022 photo, then-Amherst County Administrator Dean Rodgers speaks during a June news conference on redevelopment efforts at the Central Virginia Training Center property in Madison Heights.

The News & Advance file

**A**mherst County Administrator Dean Rodgers tendered his resignation during the county board of supervisors meeting Tuesday.

Rodgers' resignation is effective in two weeks, according to county documentation, released Wednesday, of the board's actions on agenda items at Tuesday's meeting. He resigned near the end of the board's meeting when a closed session was held to "evaluate the performance of the county administrator," according to the agenda.

Rodgers and board members David Pugh, Tom Martin and Jimmy Ayers could not be reached for comment following Tuesday's meeting. The board did not take any action except to adjourn the meeting, according to the county documents.

Supervisor Claudia Tucker, the District 2 representative and former board chair, said the majority of the board wanted his resignation for reasons she said she felt weren't enough to justify it. Tucker said the board leaned 3-2, without any formal vote, in favor of the resignation and she was opposed.

Tucker said in her nearly 14 years on the board she's seen county administrators come and go and Rodgers is the best she's ever worked with.

"He moved this county forward. He was an outstanding individual, lots of experience," Tucker said. "I would like to see him stay, but the majority of the board did not share my perspective."

Supervisor Drew Wade, the District 5 representative who began his first term in January, said Rodgers has been great to work with in getting him up to speed on county matters.

"He's been a valuable asset to the county," Wade said.

Wade did not comment on reasons for Rodgers' departure, noting it is a personnel matter.

"He's going to be missed and I wish him nothing but the best," Wade said.

Tucker also did not give specifics on what exactly led to Rodgers' resignation but said it didn't take her by surprise and she had hoped for a compromise.

"There were reasons given. None rose to the occasion of asking for his resignation," Tucker said of the closed session. "He was a gentleman about the whole thing."

Wade said in a phone interview he expected Rodgers might step away at some point and mentioned retirement.

"Did I anticipate it this soon? No," Wade said. "It is what it is. It's an unfortunate loss for the county."

Rodgers is the chief appointed official in the county's government of 217 active full-time employees and 113 part-time employees, according to a staffing report presented during the board's Aug. 15 retreat workshop.

Rodgers was appointed in July 2014 after the county received more than 20 applications to fill the administrator post following the departure of Clarence Monday, who served for two years.

Serving in the role since Aug. 1, 2014, Rodgers' stint of just more than eight years broke from a previous trend of short-term county administrators in Amherst.

"I think that speaks for itself," Tucker said.

A graduate of Baylor University, Rodgers obtained a law degree from the University of Utah School of Law and has a master's of environmental law from George Washington University.

Rodgers' experience in the public sector includes serving as general manager for the Louisa County Water Authority from 2011 to 2014. He also has an extensive military background including serving 28 years as a Judge Advocate in the United States Air Force, where he obtained the rank of colonel. Other leadership roles in the military included serving as legal counsel to the Department of Defense's U.S. Country Representative to the United Kingdom, as well as military legal adviser to NATO Headquarters.

In a July 2014 interview, Rodgers said he hoped to make Amherst County a better place at his departure than he found at his arrival and he aimed to make the county more efficient, more accountable and more transparent.

Tucker feels he succeeded on those counts and more, noting his work in striving to improve Madison Heights through development and other areas and advancing compensation for county employees to make their pay more in line with surrounding jurisdictions, among other achievements.

"He will be missed," Tucker said, further describing Rodgers as an effective planner. "He was a chess player. He was always a second step ahead ... The whole thing makes me sad."

Tucker and Pugh took part in Rodgers' 2014 hire while Ayers and Martin began serving in 2016 and 2020, respectively.

During Rodgers' tenure, county events included the near-closure of Sweet Briar College in 2015, the closure of the Central Virginia Training Center facility in 2020, recovery from effects of an April 2018 tornado that devastated the Elon area, the return of the county's fair in 2019 following a lengthy hiatus and the addition to the county administration building, a project completed in 2017.

Also during his tenure, the county engaged in a massive initiative to become more business friendly, efforts to expand broadband so it is available countywide, disbursement of millions in federal stimulus money for county projects in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the transformation of a former school on Phelps Road in Madison Heights into an apartment complex and the construction of a new transfer station for trash disposal purposes at the county landfill.

In July, the executive board of the Washington, D.C.-based International City/County Management Association said it publicly censured Rodgers during its June meeting, saying he violated the group's ethics code on political neutrality by attending the 2020 national and Virginia Libertarian conventions and seeking appointment to the Virginia Redistricting Commission. Rodgers has denied violating the code and has said he resigned from the group as a result of that accusation.

Assistant County Administrator David Proffitt will serve the board as it looks for a new county administrator, according to Tucker and Wade.

"We had a lot of momentum," Tucker said of the county's direction, adding it's about more than a single person while also praising Rodgers as a leader. "We will get it back. We'll find another one."

# 'This is the future': Solar panel facility approved for Amherst County tract

Justin Faulconer  
Nov 19, 2022

A Charlottesville-based company's plan for a solar generation utility-scale facility on property fronting Izaak Walton Road has received the Amherst County Board of Supervisors' approval.

Sun Tribe Development, LLC applied for a special exception permit request for the project on a 141-acre parcel with frontage on Izaak Walton and the U.S. 29 Bypass with about 85 acres used for the solar arrays. The land is zoned Limited Residential, R-1, and is about seven miles south of the town of Amherst.

The facility will not exceed 10 megawatts and is the second such solar operation to receive the county's approval within the past year. The site currently is vacant with much timber having been removed and the surrounding area is rural with primarily agricultural, forest and single-family residential uses, according to the county.

The project will use PV panels that are electronically connected and mechanically mounted on racking equipment from metal framing with racks will be oriented in rows. The panels will use motors to rotate east-west following the sun's path each day facing east in the morning, horizontal midday and west in the afternoon and the project will connect to into Appalachian Power Company's distribution system.

All panels and electrical equipment will be surrounded by a security fence or other anti-climbing device, according to application documents. Setbacks of at least 150 feet or more are planned from adjacent property lines to panel arrays in an effort to be sensitive to neighboring properties.

Sun Tribe Development has more than 80 employees in the area. Dan Band, a project developer for the company, said the project will generate enough electricity to power 2,500 homes per year with clean, affordable energy without producing noise or emissions.

The operation also will have minimal vehicle traffic and unlike other potential developments will not draw on county services or infrastructure, Band said.

"We've done a lot of projects in Virginia," Band said. "We have a lot of experience dealing with the Department of Environmental Quality and other state agencies."

According to Band's presentation, the Partridge Creek Solar Facility permit the board of supervisors unanimously approved Nov. 15 will provide \$563,000 in direct revenue, \$212,500 in estimated machinery and tool tax and \$350,000 in estimated real estate taxes.

"So we're about seven and a half times what it would be generating otherwise," Band said of the property and revenue for the county.

Band said other substantial indirect revenue includes jobs creating during construction, local contracting opportunities and money spent on local goods and services such as restaurants, lodging and shopping.

“There’s a lot of money spent in developing these projects,” Band said.

The company also is taking steps to make the Partridge Creek Solar Facility community-focus and non-impactful to neighbors.

“We’re giving a really good setback to neighbors,” Band told supervisors. “We will be a good neighbor.”

The solar facility is expected to have a lifespan of 30 to 40 years, Band said. The facility would be decommissioned at the company’s expense and materials recycled, salvaged or repurposed when no longer in use, according to Band.

Zkyler Zunk, co-founder and CEO of Energy Right, a nonprofit involved in clean energy discussions, spoke in favor of the solar project during a public hearing.

“It’s a big topic,” Zunk said. “We want to make sure there is a voice for rural conservatives at this table. We need renewables and we think solar can be phenomenal neighbors in areas where sited properly. We want these projects to be the best neighbors possible.”

Zunk said an issue constantly talked about is property rights and owners being able to use their land as they see fit as long as neighboring properties are not negatively affected.

“We believe that to the fullest extent,” Zunk said. “We need to make sure these projects go through.”

Solar facilities such as this tie into energy independence, he said.

“We think it’s only a good thing if we’re producing more clean, cheap electricity on our side of the grid rather than having to import it from other states and other countries,” Zunk said.

Ginger Burg, a county resident who serves on the Amherst County School Board, said she is a big proponent of property rights and supports the project.

“I’m very proud to live in a county that does stand up for our rights,” Burg said.

Timothy Forrester, an Amherst resident, said the solar facility will produce much less traffic than other developments.

“I’d much rather have a solar farm there than a housing community,” Forrester said.

Forrester said he has a trucking company and has delivered to similar operations.

“It’s going to be out of sight,” Forrester said. “Neighbors won’t even know it’s there.”

Madison Heights resident Stuart Bennett said he grew up in the United Kingdom where coalmines and shipyards closed and the people panicked when a multitude of jobs were lost.

“When I heard about this project, I was so excited. To have a solar farm in this county, I think, is just remarkable,” Bennett said. “Amherst County, with going ahead with this project, is moving into the 21st century where we’re supposed to be.”



Bennett said the solar facility is going to a landmark in the county and something to be proud of.

“This is the future, ladies and gents,” Bennett said. “And I’m absolutely 100% behind it.”