

Ridgewood Education Foundation gives fundraising campaign a boost - NorthJersey.com

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The Ridgewood Education Foundation (REF) has provided a grant of \$100,000 to the Ridgewood High School (RHS) Home and School Association (HSA) to help the organization fund its proposed library makeover at the high school.



NJMG FILE PHOTO

The single grant of unprecedented size for the REF represents a sizeable portion of the \$850,000 that the RHS HSA needs for the project, known as the RHS Learning Commons.

The organization is attempting to raise the remaining funds by this December, allotting time for permit approval so construction can begin this June. If the rest of the funding is not secured by

December, the project will have to wait until at least June 2014 to commence.

According to Jennie Wilson, president of the REF board of trustees, the foundation began looking for "something big to do" three years ago under the leadership of its past president Elizabeth Gordon.

That's why its membership unanimously decided to tap into its endowment to provide funds for the Learning Commons at a meeting on Monday night, Wilson said in an interview Tuesday.

Its naming rights will be turned over to the students, who will be able to compete later this year to name the learning area of the new library, she added.

"This is clearly a project that will touch all the kids," Wilson said. "Getting the students involved in naming it makes it their space."

"This leadership donation, we feel, will propel the campaign to the next level. The REF support indicates the importance of this project," noted David Zrike, co-chair of the association's development committee. "We believe [this donation] is going to be the key to getting this project done in this aggressive time frame. We are extremely grateful."

The REF is a volunteer organization founded in 1989 that works to fund projects that enhance Ridgewood's educational curriculum. It has a current membership of 25 core board members, who are parents of former or current district students and former teachers.

In contrast to HSAs within the schools, the REF will also "step back" and look at district education across schools, noted Roberta Sonenfeld, vice president of the REF board of trustees.

In addition to proving funding for events like Super Science Saturday and the Ridgewood

Public Library's annual Reel Voices Film Festival, it has also funded about 300 classroom grants, which educators apply for via an application on the REF website.

Last year, it funded a school-wide anti-bullying program at George Washington Middle School, as well as RHS physics teacher Harold Nelson's holography project, which taught students about holograms.

The decision to support a single project to this degree was historic for the organization, noted Sonenfeld.

The organization has given away about \$500,000 in the past 22 years, so a \$100,000 donation in one year is extremely significant, she noted. The "amazing" speed with which the decision was made was also something that the REF has "never done before," she added.

"This is the first time we've gone into the endowment in any way," Sonenfeld said. "It's a very big change."

The organization recognized that its donation needed to come from its endowment, because other funds, mostly donations from alumni, residents, parents, teachers and administrators, are currently directed toward other projects, Sonenfeld said.

The new RHS Learning Commons would replace a library that has not been renovated since it was originally designed in 1963. Among other improvements, it would include a lounge seating area, new conference rooms, a café and moveable bookshelves to allow for doubled seating capacity, according to a preliminary floor plan drafted this summer by the architecture firm LAN Associates.

There will also be new computers, printers and TV monitors that would broadcast news stations, according to Zrike. The café will feature coffee and healthy snacks, he noted.

Because of the district's new Bring Your Own Device Policy and the recent introduction of an e-book library loaning system in the district, there is an expectation that more students will begin using their own electronic e-reading devices in school.

However, dispelling any rumors that physical books will be removed from the library, Zrike said that books are not going anywhere.

"There will be the same amount of books that are there now, plus room to grow," he said.

Speaking about her personal research into learning commons, a trend for school library design being increasingly adopted nationwide, Wilson spoke about the evolution of the modern library - from a "shushing space" to one where students are encouraged to engage each other.

"It's the notion of a collaborative space that's so exciting, I think," added Sonenfeld.

While the REF's recent donation, in combination with the RHS HSA's previous \$75,000 in available funds, represents a large portion of the project's estimated construction and non-construction costs, there is still fundraising left to do.

An online donation option is now available on the RHS HSA website, according to development co-chair Jaime Frederick, who, with Zrike, is also spearheading the project with fundraising chair Tina Telesco and president Lori Weil in partnership with the Board of Education.

Additionally, a community fundraising dance is planned for Thursday, Nov. 29 at The Venetian banquet facility in Garfield.

Wilson highlighted the importance of community involvement in funding education today.

"With the budget cuts that all the districts are facing, it's going to be more incumbent on the community" to step forward, she noted.

Email: herzogl@northjersey.com

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