

10 Q's and 10 A's (part 4): An FAQ about the land acquisition for HHS2

1. Wait, where is HHS2 is going to be?



See the word New in the map to the left? I'm standing right about at the N; the view here is north-ish.



Here's one looking towards I81, standing about where the letter S in Site is in the above map. And...



... this is from the same spot, looking to Rt. 11 and Mole Hill. This is just about the highest spot on the site.

2. Isn't that really close to I81?

The property is adjacent to the interstate. Many residential, commercial and educational buildings in the valley are located near I81. That's somewhat unavoidable, as I81 runs through the valley and splits the city roughly in thirds; 2/3 lies to the west of I81 and 1/3 to the east.

To get a sense of what kind of development has already occurred near I81, take a look at the pictures below. The photo on the left shows JMU's Showker Hall, currently under expansion. The middle photo is BRCC's new bioscience building, now under construction. The shot on the right shows the Stone Spring Road bridge over I81, shot from the parking lot of the Overlook Apartment complex.



3. I really, really would not have thought of building HHS2 there. Did you consider _____? How about over near _____? What about _____?

Pull up a map of the city on Google. Look for any the property large enough to hold a high school and its associated facilities. That's more or less what we did, and we pretty much considered them all.

4. I kind of thought that HHS2 was going to be on the other side of town, near Smithland and Skyline and Elon Rhodes. Why not put it there?

Let's first note that Harrisonburg doesn't typically "bank land" for schools. In a way that's good - private land doesn't get pulled from the tax rolls to sit idle for years, waiting for some future time to start construction on a new school. But there's a disadvantage. When we do need to find land for a school -like now- we can only search what's currently available. The criteria we used to choose the site was a mix of factors. A site that looked terrific on the basis of some of these considerations could be taken off the table completely because of others. We asked:

- Does the seller want to sell? Would the city need to use eminent domain?
- Could we locate HHS2 on or over property on the city/county border? Would Rockingham County give us the required approval (remember that the city cannot use eminent domain in the county)?
- What kind of transportation, water, sewer, telecom and power infrastructure exists? Would any of that need to be built -expensively- from scratch?
- What are the development costs for the site? Lots of rock? Good drainage? Karst caverns?
- How would the location fit into the existing network of schools?

5. So, the city is buying this land from JMU? What was the land going to be used for?

Apparently, JMU was originally going to use the property for a new convocation center. Before that, plans were in place by private developers to build a very large JMU student housing complex on the site. See this blog post by the invaluable Scott Rodgers <https://tinyurl.com/y9d545no> for links to many of the historical details.

6. How are our tax dollars figuring into all this? Aren't we going to be paying for this twice?

When JMU bought the site, the land went from private ownership (held by a local developer) to state control via JMU. Also, at this point, the property was removed from the city tax rolls. State dollars from everywhere went to pay for it – it was essentially a transfer of JMU funds (JMU funding from the state tax revenue plus tuition dollars from all over -NOVA and Southside and Hampton Roads and, yes, Harrisonburg) to a local private developer. With this repurchase, ownership will return the land from state/JMU control back to Harrisonburg.

7. Why is JMU selling it?

JMU changed their minds about the location of their new convocation center, deciding that they wanted to build it closer to main campus and students. The new center is currently under construction on existing campus property on the east side of I81.

8. Will the Massanutten Technical Center be affected?

HHS2 will be even closer to MTC than HHS1, as this site is located directly on the route between both facilities. We expect any consequences to be positive for both our students and for MTC.

9. Have there been decisions made on how to develop programs in HHS1 and HHS2?

No. We are really excited by the opportunities offered by their proximity, though.

10. What are the next steps?

We're at the stage, much like buying a home, where the agreement has been made and we're finalizing all the details before the closing. When the required public hearings are completed and the council votes, we'll prepare a pre-construction analysis of the site in preparation to formally beginning to design the school.