

Christopher High School Ribbon-Cutting Celebration

“New public high school for rapidly growing Gilroy combines innovative community joint-use funding, hands-on academics and sustainable design”

GILROY, CA, November 1, 2009—The ribbon-cutting ceremony of the new energy-efficient Christopher High School, on October 30th, was a cause for celebration in Gilroy. Known as the "Garlic Capital of the World," the City of Gilroy is rapidly transforming from its agrarian roots towards a technological future. With the one high school in town, Gilroy High, at capacity, the School Board took the initiative to build a second school; voters showed their support by passing two bond measures. The result is a new school that is as closely aligned to near-by Silicon Valley as to the town's rural past.

“We're delighted with our new school,” said Superintendent Dr. Deborah Flores. “Our vision is a school that is recognized regionally in providing opportunities for students and preparing them for college.” Christopher High's new principal, John Perales, who himself was born and raised in Gilroy, and attended Gilroy High, explains that the community is excited about the new school which doubles the opportunities for local students, creating smaller schools with more personal attention, activities and athletic opportunities.

By constructing a two-story campus that occupies less area, sweeping natural view corridors of the countryside and foothills were protected and more open space was created for a variety of on-site field sports. The resulting higher density creates a more urban and collegiate campus. A fan shaped organizational layout allows for spacious outdoor learning environments around a central quadrangle, the social hub of the campus. Phase I of the new 1,800-student school, for 900 students, opened for the Fall 2009 school year.

The curved design, and the use of curves and circles, is congruent with the school's philosophy of bringing students and staff together. “My approach to staff is that we are a family,” says Principal Perales. “We want to take that model of a family and use it with our students to build strong relationships and to inspire them. We have a four year plan for each student. We are also a “Character Counts!” school and we talk about the six pillars of character, so that students gain not only a good education but also a good heart.” These ‘six pillars’ grace both sides of the monumental entry canopy, a feature which provides the school with a clear, unmistakable entry to campus, and extends into the central quad.

The school was designed with input from a diverse group of educators and community members. BCA Architects, located in Fremont, collaborated on the design with a ‘User Group’ committee, comprised of staff from Gilroy High School, and a community ‘Steering Committee’. “As the district's architects, and because we also facilitated the community design, we were able to work with the City Council, Planning Commission, and the City's Parks and Recreation Department to increase the value and use of the school's facilities,” explains Paul Bunton, founding principal of BCA Architects. The City of Gilroy provided \$4.3 million for an aquatic center, which will be built on site in Phase II. Also negotiated was the joint use of a practice gym adding an additional \$4 million to the project (funding: District 25%, City 25%, State 50%) which will allow for the gym to be available after-hours for community use.

The School District, working closely with BCA Architects and the teachers, was also successful in securing \$6 million in innovative Career Technical Grants to re-envision the Arts programming. “We're integrating academics with technical education,” explains Principal Perales. Digital, Media Arts and Performing Arts are integrated with hands-on instruction and the design supports the programming by co-locating classrooms, ceramic studio, wood and metal shops, and other arts offerings in one Arts wing. Large roll-up garage doors allow creation of over-sized projects such as stage scenery for the theater. “We're providing students with many options, always erring on the side of preparing students for college,”

explains Perales. Students have been found to be more motivated with such real-world applications, resulting in lower dropout rates and higher wages for graduates.

As part of the community's design efforts, members of the Steering Committee made many key security suggestions to BCA Architects to help improve site circulation, and prevent accidents and crime through appropriate design. Three new traffic lights signalize all roads coming into the school; a carefully designed drop-off/pick-up for cars, busses and pedestrians addresses the many traffic issues that exist at other school sites. The open quad is secured by fencing between buildings, and interior corridors reduce multiple points of building entry. All joint-use spaces are designed with separate secure after-hours entrances for community usage. With an influx of new residents and increased traffic, safety and security were an important issue for the community of Gilroy.

The green school design optimizes natural daylight through ample windows and light shelves, allows natural ventilation, and has energy efficient mechanical systems, drought-tolerant landscaping, and a compact site plan. The pre-cast concrete panel exterior skin was fabricated by a local concrete plant saving on expensive transportation costs to truck the panels to the job site. "We also recycled 93.5% of construction debris from the project," says Gilbane Building Company Vice President, Bob Crowder.

The school was designed to produce 30% of its power needs through the use of rooftop solar photovoltaic panels. In addition, the solar panels will be integrated into the curriculum by providing computer panels in the outdoor quad demonstrating how much power is being generated at any one time during the day. The school received nearly \$600,000 in High Performance Schools grants from the Office of Public School Construction for its sustainable design.

Also infused into the architecture, and easing acceptance by residents of a new school, is a design that evokes, without heavy-handedness, a sense of history and character. The new school looks like a university or college," explains Perales. "It has a presence about the past, high expectations and doing things right." High quality, long lasting materials, as well as classical design elements such as natural stone and ornate entry facades, are used to reflect a collegiate and timeless architecture reminiscent of the original Gilroy High School, built in 1912 in the Classic Revival style, and whose beloved iconic memory remains strong in the community.

Creating new historic archetypes is often playfully evoked, for example the architect, the steering committee and the athletic director researched and developed school colors and mascots. One of the middle school principals, Salvatore Tomasello, a former athletic director and coach, suggested that students be involved. Several choices were presented to all the district's 6th graders at the time, followed by discussions in each of the three middle schools. The hands-down winner was the 'Christopher Cougars', and its identifying colors are used as a decorative element in the gym, at the main entrance and paw prints appear in the ornate entry facades. "I was very proud of the students and their involvement and appreciative of the school board in allowing these future students to be part of the process," said Principal Tomasello.

Historic quotes also enliven the school and set it in the traditions of the past. As for the school's own history, Gilroy's largest garlic grower, Don Christopher of Christopher Ranch, donated land to assist the District in funding the new high school. The school is not only named after him, but includes a series of decorative garlic bulbs sculpted right into the stone-like entry lintels. "This new school is the perfect environment to cultivate dreams and ideas," said Don Christopher, whose immigrant grandfather settled in nearby San Jose, dug ditches, and then bought a tract of land; Christopher's son now oversees the sprawling and highly productive family operation. "I can't tell you how proud I am of this school," said Christopher, "and how impressed I am with their high expectations for every student."

“High school students today are faced with a host of issues including apathy, bullying, gang-violence, and many other social problems,” says Principal Perales. “We will work to mitigate problems, but also work on dream building; on creating high-functioning students. One of our challenges is getting kids to believe they can be someone --that they can go on to college. They wonder “why do this and why do that?” Many kids don’t see past their current situation, their parents’ situation, to understand that education is very powerful.” Christopher High embodies that fusion of character and function—and provides a strong school environment for Gilroy.

The public is invited to tour Christopher High School at the community open house being held on Saturday, November 7 from 10:00 am until noon. For more information contact Janie Gillespie at 408 843-4128.

Gilroy Unified School District is located in the southernmost region of Santa Clara County, and is one of a few districts in the county that continues to grow. The surrounding Gilroy community has also experienced growth in housing and industry. Known for its garlic fields, the town has become home to commuters to Silicon Valley and San Jose.
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BCA Architects gets projects built and help clients solve problems that go beyond the traditional scope of design work. Established in 1989, this award-winning firm has four California offices in Merced, Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties, with corporate headquarters located in Fremont. The firm specializes in educational, civic and religious design.
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