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EDUCATION

Ingham ISD seeks money for new Beekman Center. How much it could cost



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When you walk through the Beekman Center, you'll notice it looks different than a trip through a typical school.

The building's hallways take you to stop lights and crosswalks, and a peek into a classroom could show a child using an adaptive device to learn how to crawl.

When the center opened in 1968, the concept of incorporating real-world instruction was revolutionary. But with changes in technology and special education, upgrades are necessary, Ingham County Intermediate School District Superintendent Jason Mellema said.

Now, the Ingham ISD is asking taxpayers for \$99.96 million to bring a new building to Lansing, tear down the current facility and undertake major renovations to the ISD's more recently built school in Mason. Voters will consider the proposal on May 5.

The 0.55 millage to pay off the bond would be spread over 20 years and cost the owner of a home with a taxable value of \$100,000 about \$55 a year.

Beekman built before special education mandated in Michigan

The Beekman Center opened in 1968 after construction began two years earlier. Funding initially was made available through the state and federal governments,

though it was eventually pulled. The Ingham ISD ended up providing the funding necessary to build the center, while the the Lansing School District operated the space.

Centers similar to Beekman that primarily serve high-need students in Michigan — some with medical conditions requiring an on-campus nurse — are almost all run by educational service and intermediate school districts. The Lansing School District operated the facility from its opening, but [turned the keys over to the ISD](#) in the summer of 2024.

Construction on the Beekman Center began five years before special education opportunities were mandated in Michigan. It serves high-need students, some with multiple physical and cognitive disabilities.

The late Marv Beekman, for whom the center is named, is considered to have been a pioneer of special education. He helped work with legislators until special education was a required statewide.

When the school first opened, Mellema said, it was built without a true idea of how many students would attend to the center. Children who are served at the center likely would've been institutionalized or cared for at home had Marv Beekman not pushed for the opening of the school. Within a short time, 300 students enrolled.

The Heartwood School in Mason, the ISD's other school, opened in 1978, designed with a better understanding of what a school specializing in special education could look like.

'Everybody needs a chance'

John Palmer said he was nervous to send [his 3-year-old son Jack](#), who has cerebral palsy and is nonverbal, to school.

The family is from Williamston. Williamston schools offers special needs services for students, "but not at the capacity that Jack needs currently," Palmer said,

adding that his son needs a lot of additional support.

After touring the Heartwood School, he said he could let out a sigh of relief because he'd found a space that provided trained staff who specialize in different conditions, and was able to teach students while also offering occupational and physical therapy, and speech language pathology services.

Jack started at the school in late 2025, and already, the family is seeing improvements.

He goes to Heartwood Monday through Thursday. Palmer said it felt like every day they were bringing Jack to a new therapy appointment, but when he's at school he gets to do that work while still learning the things you'd see in a normal school building, like reading and math. He still goes to appointments and individualized therapy sessions on Fridays.

"They're giving him so much more that I can't even come close to," he said.

Palmer said his family has three different mobility devices for Jack at home, and two other activity chairs that stabilize him. The schools have a wealth of equipment available for students to try in addition to their own items.

"They have this equipment that they can provide and work with him on," Palmer said. There's a room on the way to Jack's classroom that's filled with different equipment, some things he had never heard of prior — like gait trainers, which teach students how to stand when they can't use the muscles in their legs properly.

Palmer said he and his wife Kristina teared up after receiving a note from school saying Jack took steps with a walker — something they don't have at home for him.

Since Jack began at Heartwood, they've seen improvement in all areas of his life, from how he eats to how he communicates. Jack is nonverbal, so the family is planning to get him an augmented and alternative communication board, which will track his eye movements and allow him to communicate with the family. Like

any toddler, he gets frustrated and throws tantrums sometimes, Palmer said, but having an outlet at school to practice skills, plus a team working with him on them, has helped.

"I've seen, in a couple months that Jack's been there, the difference that it's made," John Palmer said.

He said the care for students would be improved with updated facilities, allowing the two schools to bring in new equipment and technology to help their learning and growth.

"Everybody needs a chance," Palmer said. "If we're just going to leave the kids at Heartwood and Beekman hung out there, be like, 'Well you get what you get and you'll have to make do,' we'll (need to) tell that to everybody then. Tell that to the students at Lansing School District. Tell that to all the other schools, like 'you're not going to get anymore funding, you're not going to get anything new because you have what you need and you're not going to get anything new.' I don't see a difference.

"... We're families trying to make do as well, and we want our kids to succeed like any parent wants their kid to succeed. If it takes just a little bit more because they have a little bit more dependence ... doesn't mean (they're) not deserving of it."

'You have to build new'

The millage would be paid by all property owners within the 12 school districts in the ISD, which includes all Ingham County school districts and one in Eaton County. Those districts include Dansville, East Lansing, Haslett, Holt, Lansing, Leslie, Mason, Okemos, Webberville, Williamston, Stockbridge and Waverly.

It would cost the owner of a home with a taxable value of \$100,000 about \$55 a year. The ISD does not currently levy any debt for facilities, Mellema said.

The students taught at the center are considered to be the highest need, and are taught in Beekman or Heartwood because the centers have the least restrictive environment, he said.

If the proposal passes, Mellema said the Lansing School District and the ISD have worked out a sale that would allow the ISD to purchase 20 acres of land directly adjacent to the Beekman Center for \$1. A new center would be constructed adjacent to the current school, meaning students would not be displaced while the construction is ongoing. Afterward, the existing Beekman Center would be demolished.

When the Beekman Center was constructed, special education looked dramatically different than it does today. Today's building is almost entirely original, other than a roof that was rebuilt in 2014, Mellema said.

Mellema said many aspects of the center are beyond their useful life expectancy, and some features are entirely unusable. One goal upon taking over the school from Lansing in 2024 was to have the pool up and running so students could participate in water therapy, but after it was filled water it drained within three days.

Other issues aren't necessarily visible.

Much of the building is made from materials that contain asbestos, and some ceiling tiles are covered in water stains.

The school was constructed with an overhang, which worked when parents dropped their children off at the facility in their own vehicles, but today, buses can hit the canopy. Many students come in their own equipment such as wheelchairs, though have a hard time comfortably fitting through narrow door frames.

The school also opens directly into a large entryway connected to a hall, rather than having a secured vestibule.

“You can’t retrofit a school for those types of things,” Mellema said. “You have to build new.”

Marv Beekman was 'an innovator and a risk taker'

Marv Beekman worked in the Lansing School District as the director of special education before later working for the state.

In 1968, Lyn Beekman joined his dad Marv to advocate for mandatory special education. He said he advocated to get the issue on the ballot. Before it ever made its way onto the ballot, the father-son duo had a meeting with former Gov. William Milliken. The issue passed the Legislature in 1971, going into effect in 1973.

Lyn Beekman, a lawyer and now 82, still trains people to mediate disputes related to implementing education plans.

He said his dad “was an innovator and a risk taker,” and said he believed that tax dollars people paid for schools were intended to educate all children.

Because of his belief, he advocated for the center to be built, creating a revolutionary design for the time it was constructed, with some components being a part of a standard that lives on to this day, while others programs have gone by the wayside.

A main hallway features street lights and a curb for students to navigate, meant to teach them how to interact with the real world. The miniature street setup includes crosswalks leading to a school store where students can exchange their "Beekman Bucks" for prizes. When you turn the corner, there's a small apartment students can use, where they learn life skills like how to make a bed and how to cook on a stovetop.

The apartments have become standard, Lyn Beekman told the State Journal, but now, students are brought into the real world, rather than confined to hallways to learn different life skills like crossing the road.

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