

Questions surround new Liberty H.S.

Written by Jim Ecker

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They've selected a location, a mascot, school colors and when it will open for business, but there are still many questions to be resolved before the new Liberty High School in North Liberty starts classes in 2017.

What grades will it serve initially? What conference will it join? Where will its teams play before its own facilities are finished in 2019? Who will be on the coaching staff?

Stephen Murley, the superintendent of the Iowa City Community School District, said those answers will unfold in the months and years ahead as Liberty High School becomes part of his district.

Liberty High School might join the Mississippi Valley Conference, but that is not certain at this point.

"That is a great question," Murley told the Metro Sports Report last week. "We just had an initial dialog with the boys and girls athletic associations. And we just started that conversation internally."

Murley said the next step will be talking to MVC league officials and MVC school officials.

Part of the answer about conference affiliation will depend on whether Liberty High School begins as a full high school with grades 9 through 12, or whether it begins with grades 9 through 11 or just grades 9 and 10.

"Eventually it will be 9-12, that's for sure," said Murley. "The question is, when will it be 9-12?"

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And I don't know the answer to that, either.

Hopefully we will have that decided by the end of January."

Murley said Liberty High School will be built in three phases:

1. Most of the indoor components and classrooms for 1,000 students will be ready when the school opens for the 2017-18 school year.
2. All external grounds and fields will be finished by 2019.
3. The final part of academic construction and classrooms for 500 additional students by 2021, bringing the capacity to 1,500 students.

Liberty High School will serve the city of North Liberty and northern Coralville, which means students from those areas who would normally attend Iowa City West will eventually attend Liberty. However, Murley said the Iowa City school district will allow open enrollment at Iowa City West and Iowa City High once Liberty High School opens.

Open enrollment is currently not allowed in the Iowa City school district due to over-crowding at Iowa City West and Iowa City High, but Liberty High School will alleviate the congestion and allow for more freedom of movement. School officials might have to deal with a thorny issue if most of the best athletes want to open enroll at one of the three schools, but that remains to be seen.

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The majority of North Liberty residents live in the Iowa City school district, but some live in the Clear Creek-Amana district. Murley indicated that seniors-to-be for the 2017-18 school year would be allowed to stay at their current high schools, so they would not have to switch schools for their final year.

If Liberty High School opens in 2017 as a full high school with grades 9 through 12, it will need a conference affiliation at that point. If

Liberty High School has only grades 9 through 11 or grades 9 and 10, the student-athletes who attend Liberty could play for the varsity teams at Iowa City West or Iowa City High. That would require travel and coordination, but could be done.

The Mississippi Valley Conference currently has 14 teams in Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Marion, Waterloo, Cedar Falls and Dubuque. Liberty High

School would make 15 teams in the MVC, but there are questions about the future of Waterloo West and Waterloo East and its sports teams. Murley said he has talked to IHSA and IGHSAA officials about the Waterloo schools.

"We might be a good fit if Waterloo winds up pulling one of their schools out (of the MVC)," he said. "We might be able to slide right in there."

Murley said the Iowa City school district will begin hiring the staff for Liberty High School in the fall of 2016. "We'll need everyone from teachers to support staff, coaches to secretaries, the whole shooting match," he said.

Liberty High School is projected to cost \$65.3 million. It will be located on 76 acres near Dubuque Street and North Liberty Road in North Liberty.

The school colors will be purple, black and silver. The mascot will be called Lightning.