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Berks officials kick off \$10 million renovation project at ag center

The renovations to the center in Bern Township include converting a warehouse into an 8,000-square-foot office for the Berks County Conservation District.



Berks County Commissioner Lucine E. Sihelnik looks over the drawings for the renovations to the Berks County Agricultural Center and wonders where the popular cow sculpture will be placed as the commissioners announced renovations that will be made to the center in Bern Township. (BILL UHRICH – READING EAGLE)



The value that Berks County places on agriculture is evident by the presence of a large building on County Welfare Road in Bern Township that was built in the early 1970s.

The county agricultural center houses a web of county and federal agencies related, with a few exceptions, to preserving and enhancing agricultural production.

That's why the county commissioners and other county officials say it's a worthwhile investment to spend millions of dollars to upgrade the facility over the next few years to meet the contemporary needs of the county department of agriculture and the partner agencies. They discussed the project during a kick-off event Thursday in the center's auditorium.



FACILITY UPGRADES
BERKS COUNTY AG. CENTER



WEST ELEVATION



SOUTH ELEVATION

PHASE ONE RENOVATIONS



Discussing the renovation project at the Berks County Agricultural Center are from left Commissioners Lucine E. Sihelnik and Christian Y. Leinbach; Jim Sarro, principal with Muhlenberg Greene Architects; Commissioner Michael S. Rivera; and Doug Bodden, county deputy director of facilities and operations. (BILL UHRICH – READING EAGLE)

Schematic renderings from Muhlenberg Greene Architects were displayed during the event, which was attended by other county officials and agency representatives. The two phases of the project are expected to cost over \$10 million — money that will be drawn from the county’s capital reserve.

Agencies from the Penn State Cooperative Extension to the federal Farm Service Agency to the Berks County Conservation District occupy the building. The conservation district is committed to promoting stewardship of soils and waters in the county.

Originally built in 1973, the agricultural center is composed of a 36,000-square-foot, two-story front section that houses many offices and a 30,000-square-foot, single-story warehouse, said Doug Bodden, county deputy facilities director.

Phase 1 of the project includes conversion of the warehouse section into new office space for county and federal agencies, a county workshop, garage and storage spaces, updated restrooms, a break room, and upgraded electrical and mechanical systems.

Phase I is underway and is expected to be completed in the spring.

Phase 2 renovations include exterior improvements, window replacement and selected interior improvement to the two-story office suite.

The space will be large enough to relocate other county offices, including the coroner's office, which is in rented space near Reading Regional Airport in Bern Township, Commissioner Chairman Christian Leinbach said.

Commissioner Michael Rivera, who was elected more than three years ago, said talks about renovating and improving the agricultural center have been going on for almost as long as he's been a commissioner.

Besides the age of the building, the impetus of the project was the fear that agencies would soon outgrow their spaces and need to relocate. He said it's not just an ag center, it's a community building hub.

"We wanted to do something in which we could keep all of the organizations that are currently here together rather than them going to different places because this facility was no longer meeting their needs," Rivera said.

County officials and the architects looked at demolishing the building and constructing anew, but decided the building was so solidly built that it made sense to renovate and upgrade it.

Commissioner Lucine Sihelnik said she was intimately familiar with the center – as a community member – well before she was appointed to the commissioners to serve out the remainder of Kevin Barnhardt's term after he stepped down to be appointed county chief operations officer by his colleagues on the board.

Sihelnik served several years as president of BARN, the Berks Agricultural Resource Network, devoted to helping preserve the tradition of agriculture.

"I have been delighted to put countless hours in this hall, in the second level, every nook and cranny of this building we call our center," she said.

Sihelnik said she's experienced everything from strategic planning meetings to baby showers and retirement parties at the center.

"This is really a collective center and it's a hub," she said.
