

## Lacamas Lake Elementary School

By: Kent Hohlfeld in Design Beyond Borders May 30, 2017 8:36 am



Lacamas Lake Elementary School will include skylights and wood paneling intended to create shadows that simulate the feel of walking through a forest. (Courtesy of Mahlum Architects)

A new elementary school for **Camas School District** is designed to connect students to nature as well as academics beginning in fall 2018. **Todd Construction** is nearly ready to break ground on the \$30 million **Lacamas Lake Elementary School**, which will replace the aging Lacamas Heights Elementary School.

"They will be mobilizing to the site in the next few weeks," said Abby Dacey, associate principal at **Mahlum Architects**, the lead architect on the project.

The school is among projects being paid for with money from a \$119 million bond that district voters approved in 2016. It will serve more than 600 students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Squeezing a 73,000-square-foot facility onto a 40-acre site with wetlands, creeks and trees has presented the biggest challenge.

"It's a very full site, just not full of the school," Dacey said.

The design seeks to build upon the ecological richness of the area to create a "school in the country," according to Dacey.

"We want to create a very fluid relationship between outdoor and indoor space," said Rene Berndt, project designer at Mahlum Architects. "It will be a very powerful connection between nature and this space."

Designers are using wood paneling and creating nooks for children to sit in and read. The idea is to use wood and clear skylights to create shadows and the feel of a forest.

"We are trying to replicate the sense of a deer walking through the forest," Berndt said.

Teachers also had a major impact on the design of the facility. The rooms are designed in pairs with movable partitions separating them. Teachers can choose to instruct their individual classes or move the walls and create a team learning environment.

The partitions will have "features that will minimize any sound transmission" when closed, Dacey said.

Outside of the building, designers sought to create an environment much different than ones often found at schools. Instead of metal playground equipment, boulders and tree houses will be used to help students feel as though they are in a natural setting. The plan includes a slide built into the landscape.

The designers' hope is to transform the existing wetland – currently little more than puddles in a field – into a place much more woody.

"We are planting an enormous amount of trees," Berndt said. "We are upgrading (the wetlands) to be more like a forest. It will be much richer area. It will feel fundamentally different."

The site has been a prairie home to early Native American tribes, a farmhouse and now a school. That history prompted school district officials to hire Archaeological Investigations Northwest Inc. to monitor the site in case any artifacts are uncovered during construction.

"That is fairly unusual to have a monitor for the site," Dacey said.

The school will be a significant upgrade to Lacamas Heights Elementary, a pod-like structure that is more than 50 years old.

"It is a great opportunity," said Jeff Snell, Camas School District's superintendent. "It aligns with other schools and gives us greater capacity."

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