

St. Vincent de Paul third Catholic school to build safe room

written by Alesia Schaefer |



Less than a year after an EF3 tornado ripped through Rogers, St. Vincent de Paul School has opened a new junior high wing that doubles as a tornado safe room — a structure built to withstand the kind of storm that damaged the parish campus and left its community shaken.

The addition, which officially opened in November 2024, was in the works before the May 26 storm struck. But the disaster underscored its necessity and reassured school leaders and families.

“We were so thankful the tornado hit after the school year had ended,” said principal Alice Stautzenberger. “And even more thankful that we were already in the process of building a safe room.”

The new wing marks the third Catholic school in Arkansas to construct a tornado-safe structure, following Sacred Heart in Morrilton in 2018 and Christ the King in Little Rock in 2015. The Rogers addition was part of a broader renovation plan, but it gained new significance when a 2023 state law mandated that all public and private schools incorporate a

FEMA-compliant safe room into any renovation project.

“Unlike many schools that have added a standalone safe room, ours was fully integrated into the new junior high wing,” Stautzenberger said. “That’s what makes it unique — it’s not just a shelter, it is the building itself.”

The building is designed to withstand EF-5 tornado conditions, including 250-mph projectiles. The wing has reinforcements, such as thicker walls and footers, heavier doors, fewer windows, sirens and a specialized HVAC system. A generator keeps the ventilation running during emergencies. Safety shutters seal the space from floor to ceiling.

At more than 6,000 square feet, the new structure includes four classrooms for seventh and eighth grades, restrooms, storage and a flex room. The space is designed to hold approximately 450 people — the entire school population — with each student and staff member having an assigned space during drills or bad weather.

The building’s resilience was put to the test even before it opened. When the May tornado swept through the city, the building shell emerged unscathed, even as nearby parts of the church and school were damaged.

“The city was hit with an EF3 tornado, and the building was built for an EF5,” said Rick Parker, a former school board member and consultant and advisor for the school renovation project. “There was massive damage around the church and the school, and this portion of the project had no damage.”

Parker said that compliance with the 2023 law caused some delays, as the project was already underway.

“It took around 30 days to revise the design for the junior high portion,” he said, adding that there was an increase in cost. “The tornado-safe requirements added 32 percent to the cost of the junior high portion of the building, with close to an additional \$800,000 needed for completion.

“We had to look at other ways to save and to seek additional pledges,” Stautzenberger said, noting that the 2023 law did cause some projects to stall because construction became cost-prohibitive.

Construction began in October 2023, and by November 2024, the doors were open for the new junior high wing and safe room.

“In retrospect, I heard a lot of groaning about the price increase when we had to pivot,” Parker said. “But since last year’s tornado, nothing negative has been said.”

The new wing also provides additional space for parish and school programs, and if severe weather threatens during Mass or meetings, parishioners would also have access to the building.

Parker said his granddaughter, who attends the school, told her classmates during one of the drills that her “Pops” helped make the school safe.

“That made it all worth it,” he said. “The students understand we did this for them.”

“It is very reassuring to have this on campus, seeing the damage that can be done,” Stautzenberger said.