

City School Board Talks Overcrowding

By ELLIE POTTER Daily News-Record

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HARRISONBURG — The city School Board spent its first meeting of the year discussing the topic that will consume much of its time throughout 2018: addressing overcrowding at Harrisonburg High School.

On Tuesday, the board and division administrators talked about short-term solutions to help students and staff in the crowded building during the next few years, noting that opening a second high school by fall 2021 is the long-term solution.

City Council has not voted on whether to fund the proposed \$76 million high school, and it is not clear when it might do so.

On Dec. 5, the School Board unanimously approved a 1,200-student high school and selected the architectural firm Grimm and Parker, a suburban Washington, D.C., firm that has an office in Charlottesville, to design it.

On Dec. 12, Kizner, then-School Board Chairman Andrew Kohen and board member Deb Fitzgerald presented a cost analysis to council, detailing what would be included in the proposed \$76 million school.

The school would alleviate overcrowding at HHS, which was built for 1,360 students but now has nearly 1,800. And the division is projected to keep growing.

Superintendent Scott Kizner, citing data from the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia, said roughly 88 percent of babies born in Harrisonburg enroll in the division's kindergarten class five years later.

Of the 693 children born in 2015, Kizner said, 609 will likely enter kindergarten in 2020. There are 496 now enrolled, he said Wednesday. If the projections are accurate, the division's kindergarten class will grow by nearly 23 percent by 2020, which may mean larger graduating classes down the line.

Kizner also discussed some preliminary ideas to address overcrowding before a second high school is built; he will make a formal presentation at the board's Feb. 6 meeting.

His proposals include offering an additional class period each day for students who are unable to fit all the classes they want to take into their schedules. The extra class period could also offer another opportunity for students to take popular classes.

Kizner also suggested staggering class schedules, so some students and staff start earlier in the day, while others begin and stay later.

He also wants to find a way to offer more support for students who struggle academically, noting that overcrowding has squeezed out some of the programs that helped them.

But any changes would be temporary, Kizner said, serving only to get high school students and staff through the next four years before the proposed high school opens, if council agrees to fund it.

“We have to do something for the next four years,” Kizner said. “Let’s not kid ourselves.”

Kohen said he welcomed efforts to accommodate children already in the high school.

“They sound like sensible Band-Aids, but they are Band-Aids,” Kohen said. “I think it’s important that we emphasize that.”

Jim Boyd, a partner with Grimm and Parker, attended the meeting to discuss plans for the proposed high school and answer questions from board members.

Board member Kaylene Seigle questioned the cost of the proposal, noting that the firm had built a high school in Louisa County for about \$50 million.

That school was completed in 2015, according to the architect’s website, roughly six or seven years before Harrisonburg’s high school might open.

Boyd said construction costs are rising, making it more expensive to build schools. Louisa also already had some amenities in place before construction, he said, including a parking lot, athletic facilities, water connections and stormwater management facilities.

Board member Nick Swayne pointed out that some people forget to factor in inflation when comparing the price of schools built in the past and the proposed one.

Kizner said the board has already cut classrooms, half an auditorium and an auxiliary gym, among other things, to bring down the cost of the school.

“I bet you could build it for \$10 million — a high school,” Kizner said. “We may have 50 kids. And we may have a food truck outside.”

In other business, the board elected Fitzgerald as chairwoman for a one-year term, with former chairman Kohen now serving as vice chairman.

“I’m really looking forward to getting a good resolution to the high school decision sooner rather than later,” Fitzgerald said. “That’s what we’re all about.”

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