

# Case For A Second School

## Harrisonburg High School Open House Informs Public

By JO TROMBADORE Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — Residents anxious to learn more about Harrisonburg High School's ongoing space crunch and how it will be addressed, turned out Thursday for an open house at the Garbers Church Road school.

The goal of the open house, hosted by the Harrisonburg City Public Schools' Space Study Committee, was to provide a better understanding of why the committee is recommending the division build a new school, according to Jim Orndoff.

"We wanted to open it up to the community to say, 'Look at the data we looked at,'" said Orndoff, the committee's chairman and a former administrator with Rockingham County Schools. "That way they can see the process we went through and why we came up with this decision."

The committee was created in March as part of the division's approach to resolve overcrowding at HHS, which opened in 2005 with accommodations for 1,360 students and now has an enrollment of around 1,750.

Three options are under consideration by the Harrisonburg School Board: building a new high school; building an addition to the existing school; or building a separate annex at the HHS campus.

On May 4, the 25-member space committee, comprising division stakeholders such as parents, teachers, administrators and business leaders, unanimously endorsed a recommendation that a new high school be built.

Thursday's open house included a series of poster boards with statistics and projections regarding the future implications of overcrowding, as well as the three options.

The division contracted with Moseley Architects of Harrisonburg to provide estimates of the cost to HCPS to build an annex or an addition.

According to Moseley, a separate building on the existing campus would cost between \$48.3 million and \$55.8 million, while an addition would cost \$45.1 million to \$51.4 million to build.

The division has no recent estimates for the cost of a new school, but one is scheduled to be presented to the School Board during its meeting on Tuesday. The board hired VMDO Architects of Charlottesville for \$40,000 to determine the cost.

An outdated estimate from several years ago tagged the cost of building of a new high school at around \$100 million.

According to Orndoff, there are three main issues if the division chooses to not to build a new school.

First, he expressed concern that an addition or annex would only be able to accommodate about 800 additional students. Because the school is already 400 students overcapacity and is projected to grow by another 400 by the time construction would be done, either option would already be at capacity with no additional room for future growth, he said.

Second, Orndoff said that with an addition or an annex, the core of the building couldn't expand, meaning that the hallways, cafeteria and other common areas would remain overcrowded.

Third, he said that having such a big school would present other issues for students, such as fewer opportunities for leadership and a lack of individual recognition.

“With a high school that big, students cease being individuals,” Orndoff said. “Instead, they start becoming faces that go unrecognized and we become disconnected.”

While the building of a new high school may eliminate some of these concerns, community members at the open house still had questions.

Margo and Ron McIntire, co-owners of local food truck Paella Perfecta, appreciated the open house but wondered about the near- and long-term effects.

“I agree with the long-term solution,” Margo McIntire said. “But what will they do over the next two years while the new school is being built? How will they deal with the overcrowding now? My daughter gets tardies because she has to fight her way through the hallways.”

Her husband was worried about cutting the school's resources in half.

“I have to wonder,” he said. “By splitting the school in two, will that limit what the school can offer?”

School Board member Deb Fitzgerald, however, is of the opinion that splitting the school in two would not only solve the overcrowding issue, but also increase the opportunities at Harrisonburg High School.

“If we do open a new school, we have more room for more programs,” Fitzgerald said. “Because anything we want to do [now], we first have to ask, ‘Do we have room?’”

Kristen Loflin, who owns a Harrisonburg counseling practice, also supports the building of the new school. Her major concern, she said, is the health of the students, and with two young children of her own, she's deeply invested in the future of the city high school.

“Right now, I'm in favor of the new school,” Loflin said. “And as a counselor in the area, I know that the overcrowding causes a lot of anxiety for students.”

Longtime Harrisonburg resident Frank Moran, however, questions the location of a new school.

“As important as building a new high school might be, where will it be?” he said. “You can't just split Harrisonburg down the middle. How will they decide who goes where?”

The space committee will give a formal presentation to the Harrisonburg School Board on Tuesday and the board is scheduled to make its decision on June 6.

The board will present its choice on June 8 to City Council, which must vote on whether and when to fund the division's recommendation and when to fund it.

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