

Committee Eyes Alternative HHS Options

By NOLAN STOUT Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — Jim Orndoff easily summed up the feeling of a committee formed to solve the complex issue of overcrowding at Harrisonburg High School.

“We admit there’s a problem,” said Orndoff, the committee’s chairman. “We may not be in agreement on how to solve it.”

Several different options than the three main solutions city school officials have backed were thrown out at the committee’s meeting on Thursday.

The 25-member advisory was formed earlier this year by the city School Board to recommend a solution for the overcapacity school on Garbers Church Road.

HHS, built in 2005, was designed for 1,360 students, but its attendance hovers near 1,800.

Superintendent Scott Kizner presented population and student enrollment projections over the next few years, which put HHS’ enrollment around 2,200 by the 2021-22 school year.

Harrisonburg City Public Schools officials have narrowed the solution to three costly options: an annex, addition or second high school.

An annex could cost between \$48.3 million and \$55.8 million and an addition is estimated between \$45.1 million and \$51.4 million. An estimate for a second high school hasn’t been established, but could cost double that of an annex or addition.

Part of the committee, which consists of school administrators, elected officials, business owners and parents, wasn’t ready to commit to those three options.

Instead, committee members introduced several ideas voiced by residents, such as a year-round school, alternative scheduling or a junior high school.

Kizner continuously reminded the group that what seems like a solution today for 1,800 students might not work over the next five to 10 years.

“I’m just asking people to stop thinking about 2017,” he said. “We have to look ahead.”

The main alternatives — year-round school and alternative scheduling — also create several issues, Kizner said. If the school is open longer, operational costs go up and after-school activities are threatened.

Creating a junior high school also is difficult because students take classes at different levels.

“Ninth-grade kids are sitting in 11th-grade classes, 11th-grade kids are sitting in ninth-grade classes. ... Years ago, when we all went to school it may have been more factory-like,” he said.

Kizner also objected to the committee determining how a building could be used. For example, one committee member suggested creating a separate building for science, technology, engineering and math students. The superintendent said if the building is designed for it and STEM isn't a focus in 10 years, the division's hands are tied for alternative uses for the building.

He said the division needs "flexible space"

Eric Miller, HHS' assistant principal, said the school decided to poll teachers and staff on solutions to the problem. While only 41 of the school's 125 staff responded, 35 of those who did recommended building a second high school.

Monica Robinson, a retired teacher and committee member, said she taught at Spotswood High School when Rockingham County built East Rockingham High School in 2010. She commended HHS for considering teachers' opinions.

"I was thinking, when being asked questions years ago, what did it matter if I responded?" Robinson said. "Because I really didn't think anyone cared what the teachers thought. ... Sometimes we forget as teachers our input is important and valued."

Kizner, Councilman Chris Jones and Skyline Middle School Assistant Principal Margot Zahner — all members of the committee — also stressed that the problem doesn't stop at the high school.

Kizner said middle schools are stressed and the division has chosen to move fifth-graders back to elementary school. To accommodate the extra grade, prekindergarten and early childhood classes will move into the under-construction Elon Rhodes Early Learning Center.

"You have to give a system of pressure valves in other places or we're always going to be behind building schools," Jones said.

He said the city must bite the bullet and address all the issues or continue reacting to problems, although he acknowledged solutions come at a steep price.

"I don't know what the tax rate's going to look like if we do this," Jones said.

While the committee didn't get any closer to a decision, members acknowledged the gravity of their job.

"I think we're at a very crucial period right now on what's best for the next 20 years or so," committee member Obie Hill said.

The group will make its recommendation to the School Board on May 8. The board, in turn, plans to make a recommendation to council at a joint meeting in June.

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