

# Board: Council Must Decide Now On School

By VIC BRADSHAW Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — The Harrisonburg School Board on Tuesday called on City Council to vote when it meets next week on whether it will fund a second high school.

At their monthly work session, School Board members issued a statement about the proposed high school and fielded questions about it. They said a decision must be made at the next council meeting if the new school is to open in time for the 2021-22 school year, as desired.

“The School Board comes before you today,” the statement read, “to urge Council to schedule the vote on the HHS2 proposal on January 23.”

The panel is requesting \$76 million to build a second high school, a structure of about 200,000 square feet that would serve 1,200 students. That amount is expected to cover the cost of construction, furniture, fixtures and equipment. City Council would have to negotiate the purchase of land for the campus.

Board members presented the cost estimate to the council at its Dec. 12 meeting. Council’s Jan. 9 meeting is the only one it has held since then.

It’s estimated that Harrisonburg’s real estate tax rate, now 85 cents per \$100 of assessed value, would have to increase by 13.5 cents to cover bonds for the project if it were financed over 25 years.

The request is being made to relieve chronic overcrowding at Harrisonburg High, which opened in 2005. Nearly 1,800 students are roaming the halls of a school built for 1,360, and projections anticipate that enrollment will continue to climb.

The School Board voted unanimously on June 6 to request funding for a new school instead of an annex or addition at the existing campus, and it voted on a preferred site on Oct. 17. The location hasn’t been divulged at the owner’s request.

## Data Available

Architects have projected a sense of urgency about a decision since October if the school is to be ready for occupancy by August 2021, board member Nick Swayne said, and the drop-dead point has been reached to meet that opening deadline.

“All of the architects have said there’s a point at which, if the decision is made after that, it really is going to push into the next year, and so we’re at that point now,” he said. “Instead of having four to six months of cushion that would enable the process to speed up or slow down as weather sometimes impacts, we don’t have that luxury anymore.”

Though City Council has had the full picture of what the project entails and what it will cost only for five weeks, School Board members said council should be in position to make a decision next Tuesday. The board indicated council has all the information it needs and has been aware that the division would be requesting funding.

Swayne noted that nearly a year ago, the council and its bond counsel discussed the impact a \$100 million high school project would have on Harrisonburg's finances.

School Superintendent Scott Kizner pointed out that the board voted in October — before the cost estimate was final — to submit a \$94 million figure for the high school, and two council members have been kept apprised of the project at monthly liaison committee meeting.

Board member Andrew Kohen said the information the panel used in arriving at its unanimous decision to support a new high school versus an annex or addition has been posted on the division's website for months.

"I don't think we can presume that the two bodies are really siloed in the information that we have," Chairwoman Deb Fitzgerald said. "If they're not paying close attention to this stuff as it comes, knowing that they're going to be the ones to make that final decision, then I think it's fair to ask, 'Why not?'"

#### Time Equals Money

The board's statement references questions about whether teachers are doing everything possible to work within their current space constraints.

"We reject the notion that they are not, or that they will not, continue to do so even as overcrowding worsens," the statement reads.

Kohen said some council members have implied that all is not being done to lessen the impact of the additional students in the school.

"I don't think [there have been] explicit statements to that fact," he said, "but some of the questions that have been posed intimate that we need more Band-Aids or different Band-Aids than we've been applying."

Board members declined to answer a question about what they'd do if council authorizes the expenditure of an amount less than \$76 million for the high school.

Kizner noted that a football stadium, auxiliary gym and some energy-efficiency features have been removed from the plans, the auditorium's size has been cut in half, and the proposed school would have fewer classrooms than Harrisonburg High or any of Rockingham County's four high schools.

"We think," board member Brent Holsinger said, "we've got a really good value at \$76 million."

The superintendent also highlighted that cost is a major concern for many residents, and delaying the school's construction only increases the amount the city likely will have to pay for it.

Fitzgerald said she's heard a suggestion recently that the School Board put a counter on its website showing week by week how much the school's cost might increase "for the same product."

Board members allowed that they could have let their council counterparts know that they were at their deadline privately. However, they said, council should be aware of that and the School Board thought the public should know.

“We’ve been in communication around the timeline with City Council. They’re aware of that,” Holsinger said. “But we feel a responsibility to share that with the public, too.

“From my perspective, I’ve felt like City Council has been there every step of the way with us, and we’re simply communicating that we’re at the end of that timeline to get this done for 2021. We’re just asking for a vote. It’s time to decide.”

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