

# HCPS Officials Make Pitch For New School

By ELLIE POTTER Daily News-Record

**HARRISONBURG** — Three school officials addressed City Council Tuesday evening, detailing a cost analysis of building a \$76 million high school and the necessity in doing so.

Superintendent Scott Kizner, School Board Chairman Andrew Kohen and board member Deb Fitzgerald spoke before the council and about 130 others in attendance at City Hall, asking council to fund the project.

Council did not make a decision on funding the project and it is not clear when it intends to vote.

The Harrisonburg School Board considered a \$100 million high school at one point, but faced backlash from some city residents who asked them to consider less expensive alternatives.

On Dec. 5, the board unanimously approved a \$76 million, 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 Tuesday, City Finance Director Larry Propst said the city is estimating the \$76 million bond would have about a 4 percent interest rate over 25 years. The bond would cost about \$120 million in total, Propst estimated, but that cost is dependent on when the city purchases the bond.

The new high school, according to Harrisonburg City Public Schools, is needed to alleviate overcrowding in Harrisonburg High.

In March 2013, Harrisonburg High School reached its designed capacity, Kizner told council, and the student enrollment has only continued to grow. The school, built in 2005 and designed for 1,360 students, now has about 1,800.

Proponents argue the new school is necessary to alleviate the overcrowding and allow for smaller class sizes. Kizner said high school students are unable to sign up for all the classes they want because of space constraints.

But others worry how much such a large-ticket item will drive up city property taxes, which would especially affect those on fixed incomes.

Flint Engleman, senior field director for Americans for Prosperity Virginia, an organization that fights for lower taxes and less government regulation, led a 16-person rally before the meeting outside council chambers.

He thinks the proposal is too expensive for local taxpayers. Even with the cost dropping from \$100 million to \$76 million, the proposal does not include money to buy the land or build a football stadium, which Engleman worries will be tacked on down the line.

“Our additional concern is if that package is put through,” Engleman said, “that they will put another one through for athletic facilities, for roads, for the property, which would probably come out to about \$100 million. So our concern is that it might be done in piecemeal instead of one large appropriation.”

Council members, who questioned Kizner after the presentation, did not indicate when they will vote on the proposal. Kizner said he would like them to make a decision by their Jan. 9 meeting.

Further delays could jeopardize the project’s timeline and prevent the school from opening for the 2021-22 school year, Kizner said. Delays could also tack on additional costs, he said, with inflation and rising construction costs.

Kizner said that if the two high schools were up and running today, operating a second high school would cost the division an estimated \$940,000 more a year than a single high school, based on a 2,100 high school student enrollment.

The \$76 million cost estimate for a new school does not include funding for the new school’s operational expenses or land.

Kizner also explained that the division considered and rejected proposals to build an annex or add onto the existing high school, noting that though doing so would be cheaper in the short term, those options would reach capacity almost immediately and not adequately handle the division’s growth.

He also explained how the School Board brought the project’s price tag down from \$100 million to \$76 million.

The current proposal includes 64 classrooms in the new high school, he said, while Harrisonburg High has 90. The new school’s design also includes a much smaller auditorium, and does not include a football stadium, auxiliary gym and a few other items.

The \$76 million proposal includes the building’s construction, engineering and architectural expenses, furniture, fixtures, technology and regulation soccer, baseball and softball fields.

Fitzgerald said the School Board has narrowed down the land search to one site, which cannot be disclosed yet.

Council will be responsible for handling the negotiations on that purchase.

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