

Committee To Talk Options For HHS Overcrowding

By NOLAN STOUT Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — City residents will begin discussing options to address overcrowding at Harrisonburg High School this week.

A 25-member committee formed earlier this year by the Harrisonburg School Board meets Thursday to talk over options for the burgeoning enrollment at the school on Garbers Church Road.

HHS was built with a capacity of 1,360 students, but its attendance hovers around 1,757.

The three options on the table are an annex, addition or a 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. City Council and the board discussed solutions at a joint meeting in February and the board established the committee to weigh the pros and cons of each option.

Jim Orndoff, the committee's chairman, said at Tuesday's School Board meeting that the group met with HHS' principal, Cynthia Prieto, to discuss the daily stresses of overcrowding.

"I'm impressed with the commitment of the folks on that committee to come to a consensus of where we go," he said.

Orndoff said the group will meet five more times, including Thursday at 7 p.m. at the central office, before making a recommendation to the board on May 8.

The board plans, in turn, to make a recommendation to council at a joint meeting in June.

"We do have a timeline to honor," Harrisonburg Schools Superintendent Scott Kizner said.

Budget Talks

Also at Tuesday's meeting, the board discussed Kizner's \$75.8 million proposed spending plan for fiscal 2018, which begins July 1.

The budget includes a 2 percent salary increase for all Harrisonburg City Public Schools employees.

The raise would expand upon one earmarked for teachers included in the General Assembly's adopted budget.

The legislature's plan enacts the increases in February 2018 and Kizner's budget would make raises effective at the start of the 2017-18 school year.

The budget anticipates \$37.6 million in state funding and \$2.9 million in federal funding and the board will ask the city for a \$33.4 million local contribution for fiscal 2018.

The request is an 11.12 percent increase over fiscal 2017 and is partially caused by the fall opening of Bluestone Elementary School and the Elon Rhodes Early Learning Center.

The budget sets aside \$1.7 million for 31 positions for the new schools.

The proposal increased slightly at Tuesday's meeting because Kizner chose to add five new positions: a science/math teacher at HHS; a science, technology, engineering and math teacher, and a counselor at Bluestone; and a special education teacher, and ESL elementary specialist at the central office.

The board voted 6-0 to add the new positions, which contributed about \$367,000 to the budget.

The spending plan only includes \$60,000 to address overcrowding at Harrisonburg High School by providing funding for two trailers outside the school.

The division's contribution to the Virginia Retirement System is increasing by \$651,000 and health insurance costs are rising by about \$461,000.

The budget also includes a \$433,000 increase for transportation, insurance, maintenance, operation and utilities for the two new schools.

Kizner said moving forward the board should consider ways to reduce transportation. Board member Andy Kohen said the city runs the school buses and bills the division for it.

Kizner said HCPS could consider running its own buses.

"If there's a way of saving money, why not?" he said.

The board is expected to adopt the budget on April 4 before it's presented late next month to council, which must approve the local contribution request.

The board also unanimously voted to ask the city for \$2.6 million to buy furniture, equipment and technology at the new schools.

Board members Lauren Penrod, Nick Swayne, Brent Holsinger, Kaylene Seigle, Deb Fitzgerald and Kohen attended the meeting.

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