

# Panel Backs New School

By TONY BROWN Daily News-Record

**HARRISONBURG** — In a straw poll Thursday night, the Harrisonburg City Public Schools' community-based "space committee" unanimously endorsed building a second high school to relieve overcrowding at the city's existing one.

At only its second meeting since the School Board formed it earlier this year, the ad-hoc advisory committee supported the most expensive of three main options to resolve the crisis at Harrisonburg High School. Nearly 1,800 students attend a 2005 facility built for 1,360.

Not all of the panel's membership, which is made up of educators, business owners, students, parents and elected officials, were in attendance and voted. Nineteen of the 25 members favored a second school, while no one chose the other options.

The other two options are an annex, a separate building on the high school's Garbers Church Road campus, which Moseley Architects of Harrisonburg estimated would cost between \$48.3 million and \$55.8 million; and an addition, which Moseley priced at \$45.1 million to \$51.4 million.

The most recent but outdated estimate for a new facility at a different location put the cost at around \$100 million.

The School Board on Tuesday voted 5-1 to authorize a new study costing up to \$40,000 by VMDO Architects of Charlottesville to determine a better estimated price tag for a separate school on a separate campus.

The new study's estimate will not include the purchase of land because the board has not identified a location.

School officials say the situation at Harrisonburg High can only get worse; they expect enrollment to continue increasing to around 2,200 by the 2021-22 school year.

Thursday night's space committee vote did not surprise division Superintendent Scott Kizner — who makes little effort to hide his support for a new high school — because "the committee saw the limitations of the two other options, including not adequately addressing the future growth."

"And also," Kizner continued, "hearing from teachers and administration how learning and personalization [are] being adversely impacted by having 1,750 children [in one facility], it was difficult to imagine a 2,400-size high school."

The committee, which first met March 23 in an organizational meeting, will make its recommendations to the School Board on May 8.

The School Board is free to follow or ignore the committee's recommendations when the board votes on June 6 to choose one of the three options — or to approve a solution not now on the table.

Two days later, the School Board will take its choice to a joint session with the City Council, which controls the purse strings that must be loosened for the School Board to carry out any plan.

In Virginia, unlike many other states, local elected school boards cannot levy property taxes, meaning they must operate in close relationship with local municipal elected officials, who do have that authority.

Judging the mood of City Council when it comes to Harrisonburg High overcrowding is difficult.

Two of its five members are political neophytes elected in November: independent George Hirschmann and Democratic Mayor Deanna Reed. Their public statements on the issue largely have been tentative and noncommittal.

The council's two most senior members, Republican Ted Byrd and Democrat Richard Baugh, are of a like mind: Any solution involving spending tens of millions of dollars will need to wait four to five years.

That's when the city, which is near its self-imposed debt ceiling, will have erased enough of its red ink to spend that much without necessarily raising property taxes by more than many citizens can afford, Baugh and Byrd have said.

Both declined to comment at any length on the space committee's straw poll, saying they want to see how the School Board's entire process on the issue plays out.

Democrat Chris Jones, the fifth council member, who is starting the second half of his first four-year term, has not tipped his hand. Jones, who is one of two elected officials on the space committee, did not attend Thursday's meeting.

The other elected official on the committee, School Board member Deb Fitzgerald, did attend, but said on Friday she did not vote because "I get to do that on June 6."

Fitzgerald — who was elected in a nonpartisan race to the School Board for the first time in November but is a longtime local Democratic politician well-versed in and outspoken on many city issues — did not shirk from posting her thoughts on Facebook when she got home from Thursday's session.

After calling it an "exceptional meeting," Fitzgerald went on to describe how the straw vote was taken only after the committee members had thoroughly examined documents and anecdotal pros and cons of the three main options, as well as some others.

The space committee next meets on April 20.