

Report: Operating Costs Similar For HHS Options

By TONY BROWN Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — Operating two high schools likely would not cost significantly more per year than running the overcrowded Harrisonburg High School with an annex next to it or an addition affixed to it. That's according to a detailed report using simple mathematics given Tuesday night to the Harrisonburg City School Board by Tracy Shaver, the school division's financial director.

The report relies on taking the annual cost of running Harrisonburg High, and multiplying it by the percentage of students that could be accommodated by each of the three options under discussion for resolving the overcrowding situation at the city's only high school.

Shaver told the board he based the report almost solely on in-house cost figures for the yearly operation of HHS, getting outside estimates only on insurance costs.

The estimates assume similar class sizes and similar government benchmarks for learning.

During the work session of the six-member board, member Deb Fitzgerald characterized the report as "best-guess" information for the board.

The report is the latest of many reports and studies issued in the city's ongoing effort to deal with the overpopulation of the Garbers Church Road high school, which was built in 2005 for 1,360 students and has a current enrollment of nearly 1,800.

Using today's dollars and based on a high school enrollment of 2,500 to 2,600 students expected in the city by the 2023-24 school year, Shaver's report estimates these costs for the three options the school board is exploring to solve the overcrowding:

- Addition plus current high school: \$24.6 million in annual operating costs for both. This option would keep the existing school and add an extension to it.

Moseley Architects of Harrisonburg estimated such an addition would cost between \$45.1 million and \$51.4 million to build.

- Annex plus current high school: \$25.1 million in annual operating costs for both. This option would keep the existing school and put a separate, smaller building nearby on the same campus. Moseley Architects priced building such an annex at \$48.3 million to \$55.8 million.

- New high school plus current one: \$25.8 million in annual operating costs for both. This option would keep the current school and add another at a different location.

The most recent, outdated estimate for a new school is \$100 million. The board awarded a \$40,000 contract to VMDO Architects of Charlottesville to determine a better estimate.

All the numbers presented Tuesday are estimates, Shaver and board members emphasized several times during the meeting.

Shaver's report makes these assumptions for the annex and addition scenarios: an enrollment of 1,730 at the current high school — the same number as today — and 800 in the annex or addition, for a total of 2,530 students.

The second high school scenario assumes each school would accommodate 1,300 students, for a citywide high school student enrollment of 2,600.

The report adds up the annual staffing, supplies and operational costs of the current high school based on its current enrollment.

That number is \$16.8 million.

Shaver's report then extrapolates the cost of an 800-student annex or addition at 46.2 percent of what it costs to operate the high school.

The student capacities of the annex and addition, 800 each, represent 46.2 percent of the population of the high school, 1,730.

A 46.2 percentage of \$16.8 million is \$7.8 million. That number, the report says, would be the annual operating cost of the addition.

The annex would be slightly more expensive to operate, \$8.3 million, for two reasons: Insurance and utilities for a separate annex would likely cost more money.

The cost of running two high schools was arrived at using a similar student-population ratio.

A student enrollment of 1,300 students for each high school would be slightly more than 75 percent each of the current enrollment.

Slightly more than 75 percent of the \$16.8 million operating costs of HHS annual operations comes out to \$12.6 million.

But a few costs of each of two high schools would be 100 percent instead of 75 percent: utility costs for a stadium, for instance, would be the same at both schools. So the report estimates that each high school would cost about \$12.9 million to operate annually.

Together, that's \$25.8 million.

"So, basically it's a wash," Board member Nick Swayne said.

He and School Superintendent Scott Kizner have not made it a secret they support a second high school over an annex or addition because they believe two schools would better accommodate expected student growth.

In a straw poll on March 31, a citizen-advisory panel on the high school overcrowding crisis unanimously endorsed a new high school in a 19-0 vote.

The five-member Harrisonburg City Council, which would have to approve the expenditures necessary to build any new structure and to fund its operation, has not clearly signaled its disposition on the matter. However, the most experienced board members, Democrat Richard Baugh and Republican Ted Byrd, have said any future capital expenditures by the school division should wait several years until the city sheds some of its current bond debt.

They are joined in that opinion by City Manager Kurt Hodgen, who was appointed by the board.

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