

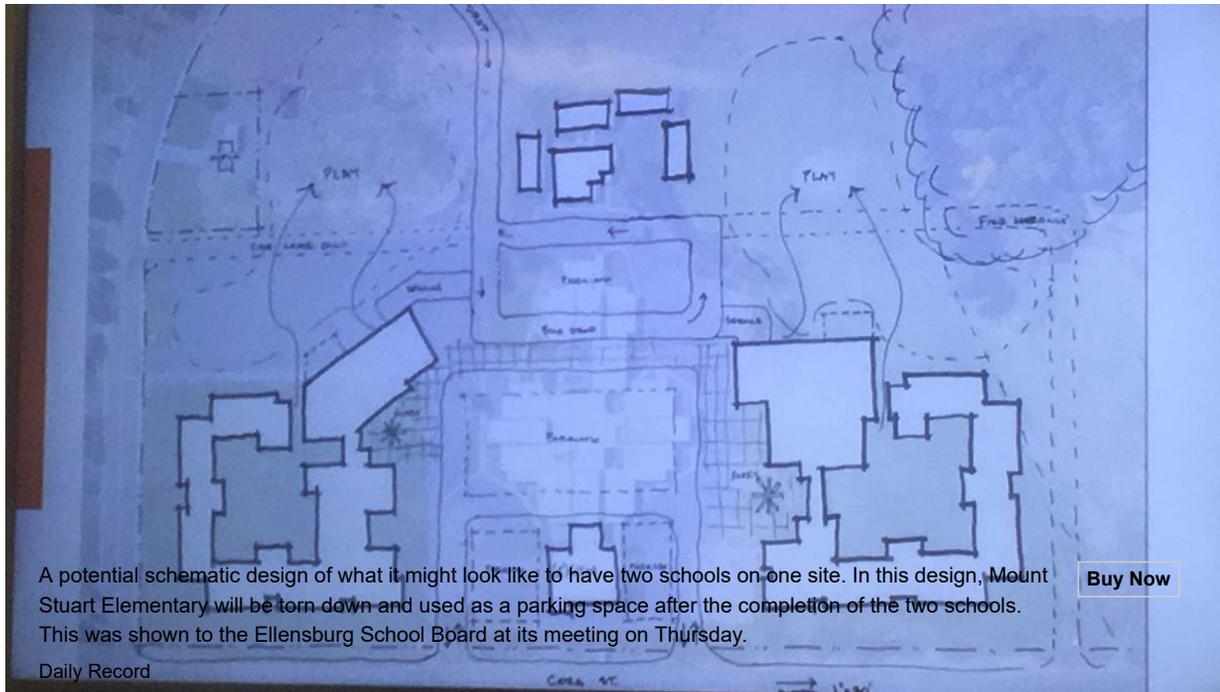
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TOP STORY

Ellensburg School District must change school construction plans

By SAMIRA GEORGE staff writer Sep 6, 2019

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A potential schematic design of what it might look like to have two schools on one site. In this design, Mount Stuart Elementary will be torn down and used as a parking space after the completion of the two schools. This was shown to the Ellensburg School Board at its meeting on Thursday.

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The Ellensburg School Board was informed it will not be able to build a new elementary school on the property in north Ellensburg it purchased for that purpose in 2018.

A team from Integrus Architecture firm discussed the wetlands issues on the land that would make construction cost prohibitive with the board on Thursday. After that report, the school board voted to build two new schools on the existing Mount Stuart property.

The district purchased the 29-acre plot just north of Mount Stuart for \$750,000 in June of 2018. At the time of the purchase, district officials said they had engaged in all the processes required including a feasibility study, checking the wetlands and sitting down with city officials to determine the requirements that came with the land.

According to Brian Aiken, Executive Director of Business Services, the district did a feasibility study before the land was purchased, but after further studies the Department of Ecology re-classified the land as a flood zone area.

“We did feasibility studies and we also hired an engineering firm to do a wetland study and those wetland studies were overturned by the Department of Ecology and they re-classified them based on new data,” Aiken said.

Aiken went on to say he believes in the future the district can appeal to use the land for other purposes, but it’s going to take some time to make the land usable.

“Much of the land they consider as wetland is caused by irrigation land ... that really changed the game for us,” Aiken said.

Aiken said a challenge public schools face is an inability to perform advanced testing before fully securing funding from a bond.

“It kind of seems like putting the cart before the horse,” Aiken said.

Another roadblock the school is facing in its planning is although Mount Stuart Elementary sits on a 27-acre property, only eight acres are designated for school purposes with the other 19 acres intended for outdoor recreation uses. These restrictions came as part of a grant from the Land and Water Conservation Fund given to purchase the property for the first school built in 1964.

“We are setting aside 18 acres for recreation land development ... we have plenty of room to meet our obligations to RCL ... and still have enough room to build two new schools,” Aiken said.

This past Nov. 6 voters approved a \$59.5 million bond to finance a new school and renovate two others. In February, district officials concluded the budget for modernization of Mount Stuart Elementary was estimated at \$24,747,871 compared to building a new Mount Stuart for \$23,553,034. The plan was modified to build a new school on the purchased property, a new school on the Mount Stuart property (existing school would be demolished) and to renovate Lincoln Elementary School.

GEOTECHNICAL STUDIES

According to Integrus Architecture, a geotechnical consultant drilled holes in the ground on the north site and learned the soil cannot sustain a school due to wetland issues and if pursued would put the budget roughly \$6 million over budget.

According to the report, a significant chunk of the existing Mount Stuart site is also included in the study as having wetland issues.

Rob Decker with Garco Construction, said the new Mount Stuart Elementary is currently \$3.5 million over budget and the new elementary on the north site is \$2.8 million over. This all comes to almost \$6.3 million over budget.

Decker said the costs were driven up because of wetland issues and the district would be looking at very costly fixes to make it safe.

“When you explore what’s underneath the surface, sometimes you find things that are not good,” Decker said.

Although building two schools on one site will significantly cut costs, structural support work will still need to be done on the Mount Stuart lot.

“On Mount Stuart specially, we’re going to have to do some sort of alternative foundation support,” Decker said. “The soils underneath Mount Stuart are subject to liquefaction, which essentially in a seismic event would not would not support the building.”

Decker said it will cost \$400,000 for wetland mitigation costs on the Mount Stuart site.

Decker went on to say \$2.2 million will be saved by putting the schools on one site and there are avenues the school district can look at to try and cut construction costs.

Decker said there are benefits to having two schools on one site.

“The play fields, for example, instead of having two different play fields, on two different sites, maybe we consolidate that on one big play field,” Decker said.

Decker believes roughly \$1.3 million will still be over budget.

TRAFFIC FLOW

Drop off and pick up is one of the bigger concerns about having two schools on one site. As of this time, it is estimated to take 20 to 30 minutes for parents or buses to enter and leave school grounds with Cora Street. being the high trafficked area.

The building's schematic designs plan to stay relatively the same as how it was presented in previous open houses, but it is now unclear if the schools will operate as separate schools or have one school be kindergarten through second grade and the other school house third graders through fifth.

The Integrus team warned the district a risk of having schools be specific to a grade like K-2 and 3-5 is it locks the schools function to work for those grades alone. Bathrooms, desks or drinking fountains would be sized to match the needs of those students and challenge flexibility further down the road.

After the presentation the district passed a resolution to put the two schools on one site and use the property where the current Mount Stuart Elementary School is now.

Samira George