

Ellensburg School District construction plan for new elementary school changes

By:

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The Ellensburg School Board learned in its special meeting on Thursday that it must change its construction plans for the new elementary school it was planning to build on a 29-acre piece of property in northwest Ellensburg it purchased last year.

The school district purchased the plot of land north of Mount Stuart Elementary School for \$750,000, but now it's changing plans for construction after the Department of Ecology determined the wetland classification was higher than originally assessed in feasibility and wetland studies done by an engineering firm the district hired. This would increase the size of the wetlands and the buffer around the wetland.

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In Nov., voters approved a \$59.5 million bond to finance a new school and renovate the current Mount Stuart Elementary and Lincoln Elementary Schools to alleviate overcrowding and address critical safety and maintenance concerns at the elementary school level. This plan would add space and renovate Lincoln and Mount Stuart Elementary Schools, and allow for the construction of a new elementary school on the newly purchased property. The plan later changed, after cost-analysis, to build a new Mount Stuart rather than renovate, while also building a new school on the 29-acres purchased and renovating Lincoln Elementary.

District officials said they hired an architectural firm to do a complete feasibility study prior to the purchase. Ellensburg School District's Executive Director of Business Services, Brian Aiken, said Integrus Architecture told the district it was a perfectly suitable school site that would have minimal site costs.

The Department of Ecology reviews the initial wetland ratings and visits the site to ensure all factors are accounted for. According to the Department of Ecology, in this case, an error was made, that once corrected, bumped the wetlands into a different category.

Aiken said the district couldn't have foreseen the Department of Ecology classifying the wetlands from a category four to a category three, which would have meant they no longer would have the room on the property to mitigate the wetland.

The district approved a resolution last week to put the two new schools on the current 27-acre Mount Stuart property to avoid going \$6 million over budget. Now the project will cost about \$1 million over budget.

"That was a delta that was too big to make up," Aiken said.

The \$750,000 investment won't go to waste, according to Aiken. He said it could be used for a future middle school down the line.

"It's very buildable property, it just could cost a little more than what we anticipated for, and we had in the budget for this elementary," said Aiken. "And who can anticipate the Department of Ecology coming in and reclassifying wetlands like that?"

Construction for the new schools is expected to begin in February of next year, and they're expected to be finished for the new school year in 2021.

The district is still asking for input from the community, and will televise Wednesday's 6 p.m. board meeting. They'll later post the video to its website.

"We will bring in two elementary schools that are going to add 1,000 capacity, and that's what we promised in the bond, serving K-5 students," said Aiken. "And we will bring it in on time and under budget by the time it's done. This is just sort of process that we go through to get there."

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