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TOP STORY

## Continuing the conversation, why the north site can't be used

By Samira George staff writer 59 min ago

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The Ellensburg School Board met Wednesday to further discuss plans to build two new elementary schools on the existing Mount Stuart property. This comes to a head after original construction plans were halted when new wetland studies would make construction cost prohibitive.

Brian Aiken, executive Director of Business Services, explained to board members in April of last year the district bought a 29-acre plot of land with a feasibility study estimating \$300,000 for offsite improvements.

According to the Aiken, the district went off of data city officials gave the district a year prior concerning the viability of the land, but during the process, the Department of Ecology in May of 2019 reclassified portions of the acreage as wetland zones that had previously not been included in the study.

The reclassification changed the buffer from 25 feet to 90 feet. "Which increased the size pretty greatly that we have to move elsewhere," Aiken said.

In the previous study of the land on the north site, roughly 3 1/2 acres was determined to be unusable. The district thought this was acceptable since 10 acres was needed for an elementary school and 18 acres would be set aside for recreation purposes satisfying a grant agreement from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, freeing up land on the existing Mount Stuart property.

"It not only gave us enough land as I said to build a school on it, but it also gave us the ability to relocate some or if not all of the 18 acres from the RCO commitment, dated back in 1964 up on that piece of land," Aiken said. "Which in turn would free up the north part of Mount Stuart for a potential future middle school."

The change in the study increased the size of property that could not be built on, which greatly impacted where the school would be positioned on the map, driving construction costs astronomically high.

### **Outside improvements**

Due to the repositioning of the school, offsite improvements, which includes things like road costs, curbs, sidewalks or sewers lines, were now not easily connected to the future school. What was originally estimated to cost \$2.3 million to satisfy city requirements was now going to cost \$6 million over budget.

Aiken said the district wasn't expecting large amounts of costs to be associated with the property, but as result of the new data would put the budget \$6 million over since a lot of improvements like sewer lines or gutters would need to be done at the district's expense.

"That was a budget buster right there," Aiken said. "We learned about that almost a year after we purchased the property."

Aiken explained to the board that not all would be for naught, that the land could dry up over time and the land could be repurposed if seasonal irrigations were to be shut off.

"Ten to 15 years down the road a lot can change and the land could be used to make a new middle school," Aiken said.

### **Reasons the north end of town was picked**

There were only two other potential building sites that were located on the north end of town. According to the school board, those sites were either not large enough, not for sale at the right price or there were concerns about having a school so close to university housing, thus were passed over.

An open house will be held at 7 p.m. Sept. 18 at Valley View Elementary about the possibility to have a K-2 school and a 3-5 grade school.

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